

# JADAVPUR JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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1991-92

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DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE  
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY  
CALCUTTA

**Founded by  
Buddhadeva Bose**

**Editor  
1961-63 : Buddhadeva Bose  
1964-82 : Naresh Guha**

**Editorial Board  
Manabendra Bandyopadhyay Amiya Dev  
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**Price : Rs. 15 / \$ 3.50**

**Published by Bhaskar Banerjee, Registrar, Jadavpur University,  
Calcutta 700 032 and printed by Laser Impressions,  
2 Ganendra Mitra Lane, Calcutta 700 004.**

**ISSN 0448-1143**

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JOURNAL OF  
COMPARATIVE  
LITERATURE

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We apologize for our delay in bringing out this number, which explains the somewhat dated look of one or two references in one or two articles. Even as such, our journal being an annual and its preparation taking time, some articles may not be freshly minted ; but some are, particularly the reviews. We still have a few overdue reviews—we will try to print them in the next two or three numbers. Apologies to the publishers and authors who have been kind enough to send us their books.

The contributors to this number are familiar to our readers, except S. D. Serebriany, an old friend from Moscow known to Calcutta circles for his love of Bengali Literature, and Kavita Panjabi and Purna Chowdhury, both colleagues in the department.

# THE GOLDEN GATE BY VIKRAM SETH AS READ BY A RUSSIAN INDOLOGIST

*S.D. Serebriany*

Sometime in 1986 I came across a copy of the *Newsweek* magazine with a review of *The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth. The news that an Indian had written a novel in verse inspired by Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* aroused my professional interest. I work at a research institution called the Institute of World Literature (it is situated, incidentally, in Moscow, not far from the place where Pushkin lived for some time after his wedding). My particular field of research may be defined as Indian literatures in their intercultural (inter-civilizational) connections. So I requested an American acquaintance of mine to send me a copy of Vikram Seth's novel. When the book reached me (in the autumn of 1987) I immediately started reading it and could not tear myself from its pages till I finished it. For several days I carried the book with me and read it while travelling by the Moscow metro (travelling by the metro occupies much time in the life of an average Muscovite). At that time I forgot my research interests and had the sheer delight of reading.

My pleasure was enhanced by a rather vain thought that this novel had been written as if especially for me or people like me, not too numerous (it is pleasant to feel belonging to an elite, of whatever kind). I mean I felt three qualifications were needed to appreciate *The Golden Gate* at its best. First, one has to know English to a sufficient extent. Second, one has to be a Russian or, at the very least, to be familiar with Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. And third, one had better be an Indologist, a student of Indian literature.

The importance of knowing English is self-evident. So I will dwell at some length on the importance of being a Russian and, later, on the additional advantage of being an Indologist.

But first of all I must in all humility confess that my understanding of *The Golden Gate* was inevitably and is rather limited. I am not a scholar of the English language or English language literature (should I say 'literatures'?). For me English is mostly a means of research and of intellectual rather than poetical communication. Besides, I know deplorably little about California and San Francisco. While reading *The Golden Gate* I simply did not understand many words and when I forced myself to consult a dictionary (that is, our standard English-Russian dictionary) in many cases it could not help me. I suppose if my task were to understand each and every word in this novel, I had to consult Webster's Dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary and some dictionaries of American and, perhaps, specifically Californian slang. But, first, as a linguist and philologist I am quite accustomed to reading texts that I do not fully

understand, sometimes do not understand at all. And, second, which is more important, poetry in general need not be fully understood to be enjoyed.

Rabindranath Tagore in his autobiography recalls how, as a child, he used to be deeply impressed by classical Sanskrit poetry (as well as by Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*) though he knew very little Sanskrit (as well as English). He even claims that when he later came to understand certain poetical lines (from Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*) better, he liked them less.

As for *The Golden Gate*, I believe this novel can stand the test of being as fully understood as possible. I would like to see it one day published in my country, in the original (an adequate translation being hardly feasible), but with exhaustive notes and commentaries in Russian. I am sure such an edition would be a great success here. For a Russian, reading *The Golden Gate* is a very special kind of experience, a very special kind of pleasure. On the one hand, the country, the life, the people that are presented in the novel are quite exotic for us. But, on the other hand, the poetical medium, the poetical form is extremely, almost painfully, familiar. And this contrast yields a striking, a unique aesthetic effect.

At this point I feel I have to explain to Indian readers what *Eugene Onegin* means to Russians. Pushkin for Russians is somewhat like Tagore for Bengalis. And *Eugene Onegin* is one of the greatest (if not the greatest) poetical works of Pushkin. Indeed, *Eugene Onegin* is a unique masterpiece of Russian literature. We all read and study it at school and then it accompanies many of us all through the life. I, for one, from time to time reread *Eugene Onegin* (at least partially) and am ever delighted and inspired by this really great work of art. Knowing many lines and stanzas from *Eugene Onegin* by heart is not a rare phenomenon among educated Russians. This knowledge comes as if by itself, so memorable are Pushkin's lines. Recently, an interview with a well-known journalist was shown over the Moscow TV. The journalist said: "I am sorry, I have a very poor memory for verses. I don't even remember *Eugene Onegin*." To give you one more example, I may recall the instance of Mayakovsky who liked to pose as an iconoclast, ready to throw away all poetry of the past, including Pushkin. Once during a public meeting, he was challenged and accused of not knowing Pushkin's works. Immediately he started reciting *Eugene Onegin* from memory and stopped only when his opponents were convinced that he really knew Pushkin very well.

My last example will be from another great book of Russian literature, which in English translation is entitled *Into the Whirlwind*. The book was written by a woman, Eugene Onegin's nickname, Eugenia Ginzburg. In the early 30s she was the wife of a middle-rank party boss in the city of Kazan (on the Volga river). In 1937 she was arrested and went through many 'circles' of prisons and camps, before she was rehabilitated during Khrushchev's 'thaw'.

Her book, apart from being a great testimony of great sufferings, is undoubtedly a great work of art. It should be read by everybody who wants to know the truth about Stalin's times in my country. Here I want to retell just one episode from this book. In the second part E. Ginzburg describes her trip in a prison-train from European Russia to the Far East. There were seventy-six women 'political prisoners', "enemies of the people", in one carriage. To while away the time, the women used to tell each other all sorts of stories, and Eugenia would recite poems that she knew in plenty. Once they were so taken by her reciting that they did not notice when the train stopped at some junction. The guards opened the door of the carriage and one of them said : "Hand over the book!" (The prisoners were forbidden to talk during the stops lest anybody realize that it was a prison-train—ostensibly it was just a freight train—a typical example of Stalinist hypocrisy.) The poor women had to convince the guards that they had no books, that Eugenia had recited by heart. "O.K.", said the guard, "now you recite in my presence for half an hour, then I will believe you. But if you fail, the whole carriage will be severely punished." And Eugenia started reciting *Eugene Onegin*. The guards remained in the carriage even after the train started again. They were taken by Pushkin's poetry and impressed by Eugenia's memory. One of the guards said : "These devilish Trotskyites are damned learned!"

To come back to *The Golden Gate*, I felt when I read it, from the very beginning, the presence, as it were, of Pushkin's novel behind the lines of the Indian poet. In the stanzas of *The Golden Gate* there seemed to reverberate for me the voice of Pushkin. And not only because Vikram Seth faithfully reproduces the so-called "Onegin's stanza" which in our consciousness, even in our subconscious memory, is inseparably connected with Pushkin. The very tone of the narration, now ironical, now lyrical, now tragic, now a mixture of various fleeting moods, also reminds one of *Eugene Onegin*. Next, the handling of the language. In *The Golden Gate*, very much like in *Eugene Onegin*, the language presents a rich gamut of various styles, skillfully intermingled. One notable feature is the use of foreign or exotic words to which the author himself gives an explanation in a footnote. This brings me to what literary scholars call "the image of the author" in the text.

In Pushkin's novel, the poet himself or rather the image of himself created by the poet, is actually one of the main characters. The poet addresses the reader now and then, recalls experiences of his own life, discusses the plot of the novel as it goes on and even calls himself a friend of Eugene (Evgeny), the central character. Vikram Seth uses a similar technique, though in a more limited way. He is more reserved than Pushkin in his personal digressions and, as far as I understand, never puts himself beside his characters. The longest and, perhaps, the most Pushkin-like digression is at the beginning of Chapter Five, where Vikram Seth in a way explains why he follows *Eugene Onegin's* pattern and

declares his admiration for "Pushkin's masterpiece" which he had read "in Johnston's luminous translation"

The introduction of John Brown (One of the main characters) at the beginning of *The Golden Gate* immediately brought to my mind the introduction of Evgeny at the beginning of Pushkin's novel. Of course, Evgeny was an idle aristocrat and John, though called "aristocratic", is a "yuppy" ("young urban professional"), a "workaholic". But, starting from different sides, they both come almost to the same condition. Pushkin calls it by the English word "spleen". John and Evgeny are both (to quote a line by Pushkin) "oppressed by an emptiness of soul". John is twenty-six at the beginning of the novel, Evgeny is also twenty-six, though by the end of the novel. Incidentally, Pushkin had the first complete edition of *Eugene Onegin* published in 1833, when he was himself 34 years old. The first edition of *The Golden Gate* was published in 1986, when Vikram Seth, born in 1952, was also 34 years of age.

But I am not going to push the comparison between Evgeny Onegin and John Brown (as well as between Pushkin and Vikram Seth) too far. It is much more interesting to compare the whole sets of the main characters in the two novels. *Eugene Onegin* is a vast canvas of Russian life in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. An eminent Russian literary critic V. Belinsky (1811-48) once called *Eugene Onegin* "an encyclopaedia of Russian life" (a memorable phrase which we learn at school while reading Pushkin). But, reduced to a bare scheme, *Eugene Onegin* is a story of love and death. There are two friends here, Evgeny Onegin and Vladimir Lensky. They are involved in love relations with two sisters, Tatyana and Olga\*. Olga, the younger one, becomes the cause of a fatal quarrel between the friends. Tatyana falls in love with Evgeny, writes her famous letter to him, is politely rejected and later marries another friend of Evgeny, Prince N. Then comes Evgeny's turn to fall in love with Tatyana, to write a letter to her, and to be firmly rejected. These are the main motives, the main elements of the plot.

In *The Golden Gate* (which is also quite a broad canvas of Californian life in the early 1980s) we may discern very similar elements of the plot, but they form a somewhat different and more complicated structure. There are also two friends here, John Brown and Philip Weiss. In the past, in what may be called the prehistory of the novel, they were involved in double-dating with two girls who were friends, Janet Hayakawa and Claire Cabot. Both loves ended in parting. In the novel itself the two friends are involved in love affairs with Liz and Ed, a sister and a brother. Ed, the younger of the two, becomes a cause of the quarrel between John and Phil.

When I read the stanza of *The Golden Gate* which describes the quarrel between John and Phil :

As brother grimaces at brother  
 When a dense veil of hate descends,  
 They stare with loathing at each other  
 Who just two minutes past were friends ...(9.16)

I at once recalled a stanza from *Eugene Onegin*, from the episode of the duel. I checked the English translation of Charles Johnston and found that even the rhymes were in part the same:

Foes! Is it long since from each other  
 the lust of blood drew them apart ?  
 long since, like brother linked to brother,  
 they shared their days in deed and heart ...?

Fortunately, no real duel takes place between John and Phil, but in Chapter Six they have a very fierce verbal duel, exchanging heated arguments about Russia and the struggle for peace. Of course we cannot equate one of them with Onegin, the other with Lensky. Rather they both may be compared with Onegin, one way or the other. But their relations, the contrast between them emphasized by some common features, all this is quite reminiscent of the relations between Onegin and Lensky.

Both Evgeny Onegin and Vladimir Lensky have artificial, invented surnames derived from the names of two rivers: Onega in the north of European Russia and Lena in Siberia. While I was writing this, I recalled that from the name of the same Siberian river another invented surname was derived, by another Vladimir, a real one : Vladimir Lenin (for those who do not know I may add that Lenin's real surname was Ulyanov, derived from the Russian version of the Roman name 'Julianus', that is, Julian in English). In fact, Lenin's name is not out of place in this context. Arguing about Russia, her history, in the twentieth century and her present plight, one cannot possibly escape the figure of Lenin, rather dismal to my mind. But this could be the theme of another essay.

Coming back to the central male characters of *The Golden Gate*, we may see that, like Onegin and Lensky, they too are both related and contrasted by their surnames, though in a different way : John is 'Brown' and Phil is 'Weiss' which means 'white' in German as well as in Yiddish (Phil is a Jew). A name meaning 'black', again in German, is given to Ed's pet, the iguana called 'Schwarz'. But, incidentally, there is also at least one riverine surname in *The Golden Gate*, because 'Hayakawa' (the surname of John's Japanese-American friend) means 'a swift river' in Japanese (as I learned from a Jewish-Russian friend of mine who is a scholar of Japanese).



Now, if John and Phil are, as it were, Evgeny Onegin split into two or doubled, then Liz Dorati and Jan Hayakawa may be interpreted as two counterparts of Tatyana Larina. Like Tatyana in Pushkin's novel, they are a sort of touchstone on which the qualities of the main male characters are tested.

Liz, very much like Tatyana, is close to nature, whereas John and Phil, like Evgeny, are all urban products. Liz's parents like Tatyana's live in the country, on the soil. Introducing Tatyana, Pushkin compares her to "a wild fearful doe", an expression strikingly similar to one of the stock comparisons for a young girl in Indian poetry : "cakita-hariṇī". I wonder if it was this comparison by Pushkin backed, as it were, by Vikram Seth's Indian linguistic consciousness, that might have suggested to him one of the most beautiful (to my taste) stanzas in his novel (10.25 : Liz in the countryside, near her parents' house) :

Outside, the red sky dyes the river  
That murmurs down the valley, where  
The leafless weeping willows quiver  
And where at dusk a shivering hare  
May be seen poised or crouched or bounding.  
There Liz one spring saw an astounding  
And lovely sight just after dawn—  
A gray doe suckling her young fawn.  
The doe looked round, unagitated  
By Liz (then nine), who held her breath,  
And who, though frozen half to death,  
Volitionlessly stared and waited  
Until the fawn had drunk its fill  
And doe and fawn slipped off uphill.

(I may add here in parenthesis that, as a student of Indian literature, I cannot help seeing or rather hearing in this stanza an instance of *dhvani* : these lines not only describe what once happened to Liz, they imply her unfulfilled desire to become a mother.)

Liz, like Tatyana, is a child of the soil, as much as one can actually be a child of the soil in California. Is it by chance that her surname is 'Dorati', that is 'gilded' in Italian ? Isn't it connected with the central symbol of the novel, the Golden Gate bridge ? And, if I am not mistaken, in the past California itself was called a second El Dorado, the country of gold.

As for the first name, Liz, Elizabeth, I wonder if it might not have derived from Russian sources. At the beginning of the novel John reads "The Queen of Spades", a story by Pushkin. In this story the name of the heroine is also Liza, Elizabeth.

There are some other points of similarity between Liz and Tatyana. Like Tatyana to Onegin, Liz writes a letter to John. Later, when she is frustrated in her love to John, she marries Phil, not so much because she loves him but because she loves her mother and is eager to fulfil her mother's expectations. Similar motives were behind Tatyana's marriage to Prince N. after her love to Onegin was frustrated.

The story of John and Jan is also in its own way reminiscent of the story of Evgeny and Tatyana. Jan also once wrote a love letter to John and was turned down by him (in fact, more than once). But nearer to the end of the novel, after many frustrations, John belatedly reciprocates Jan's love, very much like Evgeny Tatyana's. But Jan is married to death.

To be frank, when I first read *The Golden Gate*, I felt that the death of Jan was somewhat artificial, a novelist's trick to get rid of a character he does not any longer need. But the description of John's grief in Chapter Thirteen is so powerful, his suffering so deep and authentic that I came to believe in the reality of Jan's death.

John could repeat what Tatyana said to Onegin at the end of Pushkin's novel: "Bliss was so near, so altogether/attainable ... But ..." In fact, curiously enough, there are some parallels between John and Tatyana. For instance, when I read how, after Jan's death, John

... sits at Jan's old desk, goes through it  
 Drawer by drawer, page by page  
 —Old bills, old letters—to assuage  
 His thirst for some clue; some solution ...

I recalled how Tatyana, after Evgeny's departure from the village, came to his house, to his study and read his books with his notes. And Pushkin asks on her behalf :

Can she have found the enigma's setting ?  
 Is this the riddle's missing clue ?

In *Eugene Onegin*, in the fifth chapter, Tatyana has a dream, which is something like a fairy tale. This is perhaps the most fascinating and enigmatic passage in Pushkin's novel. In *The Golden Gate* it is John who dreams twice, though his dreams are quite short and uneventful as compared to Tatyana's. Here I may add that *The Golden Gate* in general, in contrast to *Eugene Onegin*, seems to be completely devoid of anything fantastic and/or enigmatic.

I could mention some more points of similarity between *Eugene Onegin* and *The Golden Gate*, but this should suffice here. Now I will pass on to the

Indian or Indological dimension. It so happened that in 1986 itself (the year *The Gold Gate* was published) I wrote for my Institute an essay comparing two Indian poems in Sanskrit. One is the famous *Meghadūta* or 'Cloud-Messenger' by Kālidāsa (who lived probably about the sixth century of our era). The other poem was composed about the twelfth century by a poet called Dhoyi who lived somewhere in Bengal, not far from today's Calcutta where Vikram Seth was born. This Dhoyi must have been quite an eminent poet of his time, because he is rather respectfully mentioned, together with other poets, at the beginning of Jayadeva's *Gīta-Govinda*. Dhoyi wrote his poem following the pattern set by Kālidāsa. In Kālidāsa's poem, a husband separated from his wife sends her a message by a cloud. In Dhoyi's poem, a girl (more exactly, a Gandharva girl) who has fallen in love with Rājā Lakṣmaṇasena sends him a message by a wind. And so the poem is called *Pavanaduta*, 'Wind-Messenger'. The important point is that Dhoyi too used the same kind of stanza as Kālidāsa, that is, the 'mandākrāntā', the kind of stanza which by Dhoyi's time was evidently associated with Kālidāsa's 'Cloud-Messenger'. The similarity with Vikram Seth's case is quite clear. I should add that Dhoyi was not the first and by no means the last Indian poet to follow the pattern of the 'Cloud-Messenger', and this poem by Kālidāsa was not the only one in India to inspire such creative imitations. Poems recreating the patterns of some other famous poems were composed in India even in the twentieth century. And similar phenomena are also known in other literary traditions of Asia, for instance, in Persian and Arabic. Vikram Seth himself may or may not have been aware of such facts in the history of literature. But I wonder if his being an Indian has not something to do with his choosing to write a novel in verse in imitation of Pushkin's famous example. I wonder if a purely American or European poet would do anything like this. In twentieth century Russian poetry I cannot recall a similar feat.

I will risk another suggestion. While reading *The Golden Gate* I often could not help feeling that Vikram Seth handles the English language much like Indian poets would handle Sanskrit or some other Indian language. I may be wrong in my feeling, because my knowledge of the English poetic tradition is quite meagre and I may not be able to substantiate my impressions in this essay, but the very readiness and ability to put a language into a strict and exotic form, to twist it in so many ways, to valiantly walk along the narrow border between high art and artificiality, to relish rich and repeated alliterations—all this looks and sounds to me very Indian. Again, would a 'normal' Western poet do anything like this? At least in today's Russian poetry it is unthinkable. In order not to bother readers with my reasoning, I would only quote the stanza (9.28) which describes the title image of Vikram Seth's novel, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco :

They park the car by the Marina.  
 The surface of the cobalt bay  
 Is flecked with white. The moister, keener  
 October air has rinsed away  
 The whispering mists with crisp intensity  
 And over the opaque immensity  
 A deliquescent wash of blue  
 Reveals the bridge, long lost to view  
 In summer's quilt of fog : the towers,  
 High-built, red-gold, with their long span  
 —The most majestic spun by man—  
 Whose threads of steel through mists and showers,  
 Wind, spray, and the momentous roar  
 Of ocean storms, link shore to shore.

To my ear, it sounds much like Sanskrit poetry.

But now let me come back to the Russian dimension of Vikram Seth's novel. Actually what in *The Golden Gate*, according to common usage, is called Russia, should be more properly called the Soviet Union. As a Russian and a citizen of the Soviet Union, I would like to draw attention to this distinction, because from my own experience I know that even educated Indians may have inadequate ideas about my country and particularly about the difference between Russia proper and the Soviet Union as a whole. At home and in our language we hardly ever call our country Russia, because we are aware of the fact that the Soviet Union consists not only of Russia, that is, the territories inhabited by the Russian people, but also of several other parts (officially called 'Union Republics' or in some cases 'Autonomous Republics') inhabited by other peoples, many of which are very different from Russians (speak different languages, have different traditions etc). Historically speaking, our state has grown through centuries as a polyethnic empire with ethnic Russia as its kernel and ethnic Russians as its main human force (but now ethnic Russians constitute only about fifty per cent of the whole population of the USSR). The growth of the Russian empire was in many ways parallel and similar to the growth of the empires built by western European nations in the sixteenth-nineteenth centuries. But the Russian empire expanded mostly by land, not by sea, was continuous and rather compact, not scattered over the world, and had until recently the empire building people, Russians, as the dominant majority. These must be among the main reasons why the Russian empire survived the disintegration of other European empires in the twentieth century. Actually, the Russian empire nearly collapsed in 1917-18, but was later reconstructed, if rather crudely and imperfectly, under the name of the Soviet

Union. It is only now that our stagnated empire has to face the problems of its transformation into something more viable, human and up-to-date.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Russians made an unsuccessful attempt to add overseas (American) territories to their continental (Eurasian) possessions. Alaska was annexed and in 1799 (the year of Pushkin's birth) the 'Russian-American Company' was established to explore and colonize the northern parts of the American continent. Later a line of forts was established along the Pacific coast, and in 1812 there came into being the southernmost of them, called Fort Ross, only sixty miles northwest of San Francisco. At that time the territory was a Spanish colony. So the Russians and Spaniards, who had started their expansion from the opposite ends of Europe, and in different directions, met, after almost three centuries, near today's San Francisco.

The purpose of establishing Fort Ross was to provide supplies for Russian settlements in Alaska. But later this mode of supply was found too complicated and expensive. In 1842 Fort Ross was closed down (it has survived as a museum today). Alaska itself was sold to the USA in 1867. Some Russians remained in California, but were later assimilated. Last year I saw a very interesting programme over the Moscow TV about Fort Ross and the Russians in and around San Francisco. Among other things, I learned that one of the Russian serfs who worked at the Fort Ross escaped from there and is said to have become the chief of a Red Indian tribe. Some members of this tribe are reported to have Russian names even now. There are quite a few immigrants from Russia in today's San Francisco. Some of them came before 1917, but most of them left their motherland after 1917. I have also heard that in California now there are many Russians or Russian Jews who have come there with the so-called third wave of emigration from the Soviet Union, that is, in the 1970s and early 80s.

In spite of all this there are no Russian characters in the multinational crew of *The Golden Gate*. But Russia as such looms large on the pages of the novel. Russia (or rather the Soviet Union) figures here as something distant, little known, not too attractive and rather dangerous for the rest of the world. The verbal duel between John and Phil deals mostly with Russia, and it seems that in spite of all their differences they both would agree with Ronald Reagan who called the Soviet Union "an evil empire".

Unfortunately, this propagandistic label contains too much truth. In fact, it was the growing dissatisfaction with the situation in the country that has brought about the present attempt at reforms known by the name of "perestroika", that is, 'reconstruction'. It may be hoped that as a result of these reforms the level of evil in our country will after some time not excel the average world standards.

Russia has created a great literature with a universal appeal. Our achievements in other spheres of culture are also great. So we may indeed hope that we will

at long last succeed in developing such political and social institutions as would be a matter of pride for us. Then, perhaps, other peoples will be inspired to follow our example in these fields as well, to imitate our patterns not only in literature, but also in political and social spheres.

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\* The family name of the sisters is 'Larin' (the feminine form being 'Larina'). I may mention, incidentally, that this surname has recently acquired a new dimension for us. With the rehabilitation of Nikolay Bukharin, the famous opponent (and one time ally) of Stalin, we have learned more about his family life. N. Bukharin's father-in-law, an eminent Bolshevik in his own right, changed his real (Jewish) surname for the pen-name (and party-name) Larin, under which he became rather famous. N. Bukharin's only son too, who was an infant at the time of his father's execution, now has the surname Larin. The fact that a Bolshevik borrowed his party-name from *Eugene Onegin* is one more telling testimony to this novel's significance in Russian culture.

# PREMONITIONS OF POSTMODERNITY AND BANGLA POETRY

*Probal Dasgupta*

## PREAMBLE

The following text, written in summer 1978 at New York University (with bibliographic assistance from Soumya Chakravarti and the Chicago University Library) and presented at the October 1978 Asian Studies conference in Syracuse, was an intervention shaped by the fluid conjuncture of those times. If it strikes me now as being worth publishing, this is because shifts in the diction and rhetoric of literary metadiscourse make it possible for many, and tempting for some, to read such a text as prefiguring the self-articulation of what is coming to be seen as a postmodern period in Bangla writing. I do not wish to endorse any particular prevalent articulation of the notion of postmodernity, but I do feel that, if one cannot wish away the increasingly frequent use of the word, it is necessary, at the empirical level, to make available any material—such as the text presented here—indicating that there may have been a termination of modernism and the beginnings of something new in Bangla writing. And at the conceptual level, one must make some sense of the word 'postmodern' and its cognates even if one does not agree with existing proposals in this domain.

The text presented here suggests that work done in the domain of Bangla poetry-writing from the late sixties onwards—not necessarily only by poets who begin publishing in that period—exhibits a new type of informality and earthiness. Let us assume for a moment that one is interested in writing done within certain chronological limits (rather than in the work of particular generations), and that our decision to invoke the themes of the theory of diglossia (the systematic bifurcation of High/Formal vs. Low/Informal in the structure of language) leads us to ask fruitful questions about the corpora assembled on such a chronological basis. On these assumptions, the answers given in our text, in terms of earthiness and informality, seem to push our diglossic inquiry and our impersonal time-framing towards a notion of pleasure which breaches these boundaries, even as we try to read these answers in relation to the non-author-oriented method of sampling and the structuralist interpretation of the Informal. And the theme of pleasure, which alone can underpin the force of earthiness or of a positive informality, suggests a rereading of the facts in the light of the argument—central to my 1992 book *The Otherness of English : India's Auntie Tongue Syndrome* (Delhi : Sage)

[forthcoming in June]—that the postmodern moment of the long-term process of modernization is the moment at which modernization can proceed only at the pleasure of the people. This argument, which counterposes the regional publics and their pleasures to a global enlightenment whose expansionist 'modernity'-imposing initiatives are held in check, tamed, and gradually reoriented by the regions of the earth, is the heart of my own reading of how the postmodern moment relates to the modern space which it terminates and modifies. Readers who accept some version of this argument will agree with me that one can both redeem and supersede the following text by rereading it in terms of a diglossia theory whose Low term is conceptualized as Pleasure—the diglossia theory that my book *The Otherness of English* articulates in some detail.

**Text : On Some Recent Work in Bangla Poetry**

I shall discuss some of the recent Bangla poetry of West Bengal from a quite personal standpoint. Making no attempt to be historical with a capital H, I shall focus instead on apparent trends and ongoing explorations. Accordingly, I choose to look closely at the period 1966-75 (which I shall inaccurately call 'the seventies'), a convenient choice because in Bangla poetry new things have indeed been happening in this decade—so new that criticism is lagging behind.

Mainstream criticism of Bangla poetry tends to concern itself with terrains that were explored in earlier decades, even when it looks at contemporary work. Both by way of mapping out the territory that recent poets treat as explored and known and in order to tie in my discussion with mainstream concepts, I will now briefly survey pre-seventies work as I see it.

I take the three big happenings in modern Bangla poetry to have been (1) Tagore, (2) the Thirties, and (3) the Fifties. Tagore's influence was in the nature of an unintended monarchy. And the work of the Fifties has had an unintended oligarchy quality to it. It is both too early and too late to make sweeping generalizations about the Thirties. I shall simply pick out a few giants from that period and make them serve my expository purposes. After deriving certain analytic categories from the Thirties, I shall use them to illuminate the Seventies.

I should add at the very outset that these conventional decade designations should not be interpreted strictly according to the calendar. They are more like a monsoon or a five-year plan which may spill over into the next season or upset the schedule drastically. The Forties as a poetic period, for instance, spilled over into the calendar's fifties, so that when I speak of the Fifties as a poetic period I really mean poems published in the years 1955-1965.

We turn now to the Thirties. The poems of Jibanananda Das, Sudhindranath Datta and Amiya Chakravarty represent three relatively pure poles of artistic



accomplishment typical of the Thirties. These authors shared the twentieth century's problematic shaped by what was seen as a confrontation with a suddenly fragmentary, tentative, unmanageable, contradictory universe of social and personal life. Although they reacted differently to this, all three authors responded personally rather than in an overtly political key. Most mainstream poets have followed suit.

Jibanananda's response to the problematic was to draw on otherwise untapped rural material and on unusual synaesthetic and other juxtapositions that went beyond the merely picturesque imagination, touching on the notion of what his critical prose calls "a new world. If we should imagine a new water in place of all the waters of the earth, a new lamp in place of all its lamps, then it may be possible to discard all days and nights and human beings and desires, all the dust and stars and skeletons of creation, and conjure a new usable order which would be poetry, existing by virtue of a secret relationship with life, a new and grey-hued relationship maintained through subterranean tunnels."<sup>1</sup> His work has been enormously influential.

Sudhindranath's personal response to the problematic was to intensify and intensely express his horror of the new disorder and his fascination with the new, tentative mode of delight. His intensity was a matter of form as well as ethos, and both owed much to the new aesthetic of vocabulary and metre which emerged in the twenties and thirties and left a mark on the language. Let me digress slightly in order to discuss this aesthetic whose architecture few poets have explored with as much formal thoroughness as Sudhindranath.

The new aesthetic of vocabulary was a stylistic and historical awareness of Bangla word structure in all its heterogeneity and the manipulation of grammatical and lexical categories in ways that reflected this awareness. The Colloquial Standard ('Chalit') revolution had just taken place. Written Bangla now had two norms, a high or Saadhu norm and the new low or Chalit norm challenging the old hegemony. Archaic or saadhu forms of verbs and pronouns and word order were still prevalent in some genres, while in other parts of the literary space Chalit Bangla with its down-to-earth, compact, light diction was on the way to a new hegemony. This dualism of language made many people pay attention to language structure. It suddenly became a formal poetic question whether or not to allow the predominance of words ending in the vowel e which would result if one were to permit the Chalit style to run loose with its mobile and loud verbs.

To explore the circumstances further let us recall that Suniti Kumar Chatterji's classic analysis of Bangla structure, *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*, had just appeared. Tagore and other thinkers were interested in the implications of such linguistic research for the options open to poets. A new theory of metrics was being developed. It was based on Tagore's

conjecture that Bangla speech habits warrant three sorts of metre, three sorts of systematic stylization of speaking. In the medieval system, one distorts in the direction of counting one syllable—any syllable—as a mora. In the anti-medieval system, one always counts a closed syllable as two and an open syllable as one mora. In the folk verse system, one mixes these strategies opportunistically, and if you have a good ear your opportunism comes out as genius.

Apart from syllables, the linguistic attention of poets also focused on the way Sanskritic, Persian-derived, and *tadbhava* strata in the vocabulary had different types of resonance. Now that these stratifications had been analysed, the resonance distinctions became more self-conscious and were explored in new ways.

For example, many new or revived combinations of Sanskrit elements came into currency to render concepts from Western science and thought—such as *partisama* for 'symmetrical' or *upaatta* for 'data'. The use of such words gave an overwhelming hegemony to the Sanskritic stratum of Bangla. To counter such hegemony, poets like Sudhindranath used a large quota of Persian and highly colloquial forms. The slightly anachronistic juxtaposition of modern themes with Sanskrit words (and their emotional/erotic associations) and self-consciously Persian-derived or colloquial *hors-d'oeuvres* made possible a fascinating sort of play on the structure and content of poetry. The exploitation of these ludic possibilities was one of the responses, in the thirties, to life in a semi-industrialized colonial country ruled by a West that was going to pieces.

One may use a sweeping metaphor and say that Jibanananda worked on the chemistry of his poetic cosmos while Sudhindranath was busy with the physics of thought and language. Amiya Chakravarty, the third polar figure of the Thirties, did not impose either of these sorts of unity on his work. He responded to his version of the problematic with a quiet, world-indicating gesture that spanned centuries, countries, minds, and held it all together. Here is an illustration :

Vast the forest, giant the trees—  
Once you are out, all gone.  
Inside, a greenish darkness—whispers, branches, leaves  
Birds and glow-worms, glowing eyes of owls ...  
The rage of frosty moonlight piercing through,  
And flesh of berries, tang of arrowy flowers,  
And terror swiftfoot, and hour sudden and timeless  
Once you are out, all gone.  
Outward I look, the horizon in my eyes,  
Evenings with a streak of village smoke,  
Unconcerned rivers moistening the earth

Where sprouts wild rice untended,  
 And all belongs to the far apart.  
 In my heart not yet a hint,  
 No sign of finding, coming home ;  
 But Sight is here.<sup>2</sup>

The Fifties were the third major event in my reckoning. The poets of the Fifties wrote poetry which looked as though you could pick up the algorithms for its production relatively easily. Their work gave the impression that it was liberating both the language and its spiritual-erotic ambience, moving us all into a new realm, and that to know this realm you had to share these poets' special mixture of a certain fierceness and a mellow sense of room. These appearances encouraged artistically ambitious boys and girls to read and imitate this poetry more than was good for their own growth. Furthermore, the poets of the fifties themselves had to break out of their own spell to attain mature self-realization ; so they went through a second phase, extending into the seventies.

Both of these features are Tagore-like—the detrimental effect on younger poets as well as the self-surpassing later phase. The poets of the fifties did not notice that they as a group resembled Tagore in these respects. They were not a particularly coherent group and certainly did not move into their second phase 'together'. And they were unconcerned about their influence on others.

This is why, when the younger poets felt suffocated and were angry with the poets of the fifties for hurting their growth, the fifties people were genuinely surprised, and the younger poets felt puzzled and frustrated at not being able to single out an enemy who could be attacked and would acknowledge direct responsibility. By now, the bitter confusion is over. The poets of the fifties themselves have more or less completed their second-phase explorations. In coexistence with and in complementation to this work, later poets have launched new projects which, as they develop, are almost certain to lead to a renewed closeness with the work of the thirties.

For, much like the thirties, the seventies have been a fundamental period of new beginnings and uncollective, pure interrogation of the contemporary human world.

The background note that informs these new beginnings is a feeling of ease which a later poem of Shakti Chattopadhyay expresses as follows :

I guess love used to be difficult before.  
 Now it is versatile like wind, always  
 on the move like clouds, healthy as breathing  
 near the water of a stream, propitious like a beautiful face—  
 at this age, I guess, love has learnt how to be at ease.<sup>1</sup>

All poets working in Bangla today feel relieved that, for all its occasional flippancy, the hard work of the fifties has left our poetic idiom in possession of a mature power for expression and modulation. This power goes beyond mere form. The work of the fifties has driven home two realizations. First, there is no uniquely specifiable and explorable gamut of human attitudes. At any moment you and I might find ourselves propelled into an entirely new mood ; and a poet will in general be able to find an unheard-of permuted image or formal surprise representing the new mood validly. The second aspect of the realization is that the same gods that preside over the birth of such new moods and images have also decreed that most experience and poetry will be normally ruled by a few hegemonic core moods—some grand, some corny, and many hackneyed beyond belief. To this double realization the appropriate response is, of course, some mixture of amused spectatorship and coherent anger. We are now collecting our emotions and mobilizing our personal sorts of despair, experiment and interestedness to formulate such an appropriate response. That is what the poetic effort today is all about. I shall now outline the strategy of this mobilization in terms of how current work takes up the project of the Thirties.

Jibanananda Das's early preoccupation with so-called *nirjon* (solitary) and *dhushor* (grey) regions is still with us, his way of refraining from continuing the neo-classicist celebration of life that was the keynote of Tagore. What we inherit from Jibanananda's studiously unglorious grey style is a careful and by now traditional way of drawing strange connections. An especially telling example is a poem by Benoy Majumdar that begins as follows :

I refer to your memory with the care of speaking  
a foreign language ; the monuments of the past get in the way.<sup>4</sup>

The point of such connection-drawing is not the interesting image as such, but the technique of drawing attention to one shade of grey—an ordinary item in an undistinguished repertoire where overcrowding makes the classical privilege of beautiful moments inaccessible or far less readily accessible—by sharp chromatic contrast with a quite different shade of grey.

What fascinated the later Jibanananda was the irrational, experiential concreteness of human time, and the systematic efforts to understand time by such students of our roots as Marx, Freud and Darwin. It puzzled him that different regions of human time should be continuous and yet incommensurable in ways that normal personal or historical subjectivity cannot begin to look at, let alone fathom. This brokenness and unity of time worries Shankha Ghosh and Shakti Chattopadhyay in their articulate second-phase work. See Shakti Chattopadhyay's book *Fragments*<sup>5</sup>, and Shankha Ghosh's poem "Continuity" from which I now quote :

All over the eerie landscape, two toy people  
emerge with their past shrouded in satisfactions and sadnesses  
and, scared, they come as close as they can to the crops

For this satisfaction, this sadness, this sky  
tear us away towards different pained countrysides

and, in response to this pain and bafflement—

The first raindrop falls between us, blue,  
and you bend and pick up a handful of earth

Which you throw into the air, as you say, without meeting my eyes :  
Don't worry. Don't worry any. It'll all come out right.<sup>6</sup>

Turning now to the Sudhindranath pole, current work continues his self-conscious language experiment. Partly it is a matter of Western concepts, as in Benoy Majumdar's poem "Like a set of simultaneous equations"<sup>7</sup> which makes metaphoric use of a phrase that means 'eliminating a variable'. Partly it is a matter of English words as well, as in Sunil Gangopadhyay's phrase *bekigato ziro awar* 'personal zero hour'<sup>8</sup>. There has been a general preponderance of extremely colloquial language use. It is difficult for translations to convey this. Such language often helps the poet to make not only a local point, confined to the poem, but a statement about the new poetic paradigm. Rudrendu Sarkar, in the passage

My God hasn't been feeling well ;  
spasms in his chest  
'cause he keeps doing this stunt of being young<sup>9</sup>

juxtaposes the English word stunt with a Sanskrit word for 'youth' (*joubon*, which is not normally used in the spoken register), and at the same time continues Sudhindranath's inquiry into God's fate, combining this with a later decade's lightness of style—its touch of humour.

Sudhindranath's basic romanticism had coupled with his longing for a less romantic reality in love to produce an explosive mix; one poet who has inherited this is Sunil Gangopadhyay, who reminds his lover of a promise :

You had promised you would teach me unattached love-making.<sup>10</sup>

Even more intensely than Sudhindranath had done, recent work stresses

the matter-of-fact quality of lovelessness, as when Sunil Gangopadhyay declares :

I gave the last of my love to the woman who came before,  
and now my heart is empty like a big city street at night.<sup>11</sup>

Sudhindranath's incipient explicitness has increased exponentially, to the point where today's poetic diction makes available as much openness of description as particular poets want or need. Images such as Goutam Guha's "round moon, like a fair-skinned buttock uncovered / by a blue sari slipping off"<sup>12</sup>, and thoughts like Tushar Roy's redefinition of a prostitute as a "ninety-minute wife"<sup>13</sup>, are the tip of the iceberg; there is a growing acceptance of the earthy as a mode of poetic statement. But such speculations and explicitness are also combined, as in the work of Benoy Majumdar, with structures<sup>14</sup> formally isomorphic to classical music<sup>15</sup> which explore the motif of sexuality quite self-consciously in the context of psychoanalytical theories of sublimation, seeking a new dialogue between the inquiry into the foundations of cognition or representation and our basic attitudes to the sexual.

The poetic pole represented by Amiya Chakravarty in the thirties seems to go unrepresented. Contemporary poets as different as Nirendranath Chakravarti, Kabita Sinha, Saratkumar Mukhopadhyay, Debaroti Mitra, Subrata Chakravarti, Vijaya Mukhopadhyay voice a strong concern about the death of innocence, the effect of brutally frank contraception policies on the erotic sensibility, the inadequacy of males and their sexist God, and in general the unavailability of a space in the contemporary visual field for dreams of synthesis or integration. Instead of documenting this statement by producing a patchwork of further poem fragments, let me try to explain the apparent absence of Amiya Chakravarty's world-spanning vision in our time.

Consider the following poem by Shankha Chosh :

If it does happen it does, if it doesn't it doesn't.  
This is how  
You should take life.  
Besides, learn a thing or two  
from the quiet  
dissent in the eyes of  
this naked beggar woman  
reduced to living on the street.

'There's that, too'.<sup>16</sup>

It is in this sort of social antinomy that we see what our reflections on the Jibanananda pole of the field of the Thirties have led us to call the distance between different regions of human time. This consciousness of social distances haunts the work of all poets working in the seventies.

Now Juxtapose what we learn in the context of Shankha Ghosh's poem with a piece of doggerel verse from the street graffiti of the Calcutta of the early seventies: *Subrato tumi egie calo / amra tomay korchhi follow* (Subrata, you go forward / we are going to follow you), where the facetious rhyme combining a native verb with the English-derived word *follow* adds a frivolous note to, but does not affect the political viability of, this slogan about a Youth Congress leader. Here we see a formal and tonal antinomy within the voice of the versifier, within the language. Tonal contradiction is the site where participants grasp and partially express what they learn about the distance between human times in the context of social contradiction.

The generations now active have inherited a galaxy of social conflicts, and some knowledge of tonal dissonance as a way of representing and coping with such distances, from the work of past generations. The general perception is that we have inherited a mass of puzzles—not some overarching problematic where one can work towards a general type of master solution which would make sense of the relations between different types of problems. Thus, it becomes understandable that current work tends to be frivolous and to concentrate on local formal play, ignoring or setting aside not only particular shibboleths of what used to be good taste, but even the operative concept of a system of taste or diction. A generation that sees its task as that of coping with the complex and not necessarily hopeless aftermath of political and human disasters, including the massacre of the young in the Bengal of the late sixties and early seventies, is bound to focus on articulating the dissonances as fully as possible. And it makes sense that older poets, in step with the work of those who are coming into their own as poets of the seventies, should refrain from discovering magical overall harmonies based on their earlier poetic projects.

This is why the world-spanning idiom and range of topics available to Bangla poetry in the seventies have not been conducive to a pursuit of coherence, but have led to an emphasis on disharmony in this enlarged world. For better or for worse, poets in the seventies have mainly been concerned with humour and other ways of coping with distances, slippages and gaps. Poetry in this period does not serve as a preparation for concrete action or as a space of dreaming, for those types of poetics would correspond to a vision of coherence which the work of the seventies neither pursues nor envisages. Of course, this is not to rule out a return to such concerns in the future.

## NOTES

1. Pp. 103-4 of his article "On Poetry" (Bangla original written in 1938). This translation is by Clinton B. Seely and Buddhadeva Bose (99-107 in *An Anthology of Bengali Writing*, ed. Buddhadeva Bose ; Madras : Macmillan, 1971).
2. "The Vedantist", trans. B. Bose, *Anthology*, 135 .
3. My translation from *Chinno Bicchinno* by Shakti Chattopadhyay (Calcutta : Ananda, 1975), 11.
4. My translation from *Phire Eso Chaka* by Benoy Majumdar (Calcutta : Kolkata Prokashoni, 1971).
5. The book referred to in note 3.
6. My translation from *Murkho Baro, Samajik Nay* by Shankha Ghosh (Calcutta : Ananda, 1974), 24 ; original title of poem "Santoti".
7. This poem (original title "Sahosomikaroner Moto") anthologized and translated in *Anarchy and the Blue*, ed. Shuva Prasanna and Shakti Chattopadhyay (Calcutta : Visvabani, 1976).
8. Sunil Gangopadhyay's selected poems (*Sunil Gangopadhyayer Sreshtho Kobita* ; Calcutta : Bharavi, 1970), 46 ; original title of poem "Ami Ki Rakom Bhabe Benche Achhi" 'How I am living'.
9. My translation from Rudrendu Sarkar's *Alexander Bikri Kare Danter Majon* (Calcutta : Anirban Prokashoni, 1972), 27 ; original title of poem "Ekhone Shukoy Ni" 'Not yet dry'.
10. My translation from Sunil Gangopadhyay's selected poems (see note 8), 32 ; original title of poem "Himojug" 'Ice age'.
11. My translation from op. cit., 38 ; original title "Prembihin" 'Loveless'.
12. My translation from *Kaler Kobita*, Santanu Das (Calcutta : Dey's Publishing, 1976), 184, Goutam Guha's "Ekhone Chandrocchuto" 'Now fallen from the moon'.
13. My translation from op. cit., 190, Tushar Roy's "Goti Samporkito Kobita" 'Poem about movement'.
14. *Aghraner Onubhutimala* by Benoy Majumdar (Calcutta : Aruna, 1974).
15. I am indebted to Arindam Chakravarti (personal communication) for the observation that the use of phrasal repetition in Benoy Majumdar's *Aghraner Onubhutimala* is analogous to the characteristic formal patterns in Indian classical music.
16. My translation from *Murkho Baro, Samajik Nay* (see note 6), 61, original title of poem "Howa" 'Happening'.



# THE DENSE DESOLATE PATHWAY : ROUTES OF BHAKTI IN MEDIEVAL INDIAN LITERATURE

*Swapan Majumdar*

Historians—mostly British and some Indians on their trail—have often tried to argue that as a nation India lacked political unity until the advent of the British. Such an argument may not be absolutely wrong. But at the same time it should not have escaped such historians' notice that an emotional identity based on a wide-spectrum religious acculturation not only structured the Indian society, but created an atmosphere for continuous dialogue and mobility within the country compensating adequately for the so-called political fragmentation. This emotional bond was perhaps more substantial than that of the usual political interdependence of interests. The truth of my contention may be best exemplified by the Bhakti movement of medieval India spread nearly over a millenium.

From Vālmīki to Kālidāsa, that is, from the epic to the classical age, the poets, we find, had a comprehensive idea of the subcontinent, of its geophysical and cultural contours. Raghu's conquests, though fictional, reflect a thorough understanding of the ways of movement of the common people. The routes of Bhakti were not far removed from these. Poets of later Purāṇas drew a vivid sketch of the growth, decline and rebirth of Bhakti. In *Padmā Purāṇa* we read :

utpannā Draviḍe ca hāṃ Kaṇṇāṭake vṛddhimāgatā /  
sthītā kiṇcinmahārāṣṭre Gurjare jīrṇātāṃ gatā //  
Vṛndāvanaṃ punaḥ prāpya navīne surūpiṇī /  
jātāhaṃ yuvatī samyak preṣṭharūpa tu sāmpratam //

(Born in the Dravid land, I (Bhakti) grew up in Karnataka, lived some time in Maharashtra, then decayed in Gujarat. Having found my rebirth in Vrindaban, I, the beautiful maid, am presently growing up sprightly.)

Yet it is a matter of pity that Bhakti poetry has hardly been appreciated as a pan-Indian phenomenon. When we hear devotional songs with refrains like "Tulsi - Mira - Sur - Kavir ek tunirme charo tir" (Tulsidas, Mira, Surdas and Kabir are but four arrows in the same quiver)<sup>2</sup>, or when scholars consider Bhakti as a reorientation of the Vedic Aryan precepts<sup>3</sup> or historians treat Bhakti as a reaction to the impact of Islam<sup>4</sup>, we cannot but feel uneasy about our parochial myopia. Had the Vindhyas, then, blocked our vision? Even if they did so for

most of us, they could not desist the devotees. However insular or immobile the medieval age in general might have been, in India it was truly an age of extensive cultural contacts and confluences that made room for revolutionary expressions in artistic creativity, philosophical formulations and social equanimity. And it should be borne in mind that these reformations were not wrought in Sanskrit but in the regional languages—the most natural and intimate vehicle of expression for the people.

Bhakti has been a sustaining strand of Indian thought. But a close look at its medieval variety would immediately reveal that far from being unidirectional, it flourished in multistream currents. While Bhakti celebrated the revival of the essentials of Indian scriptures, it was simultaneously a dissent movement that went against the Brahminic authority and the dependence on Kshatriya royalty. On the other hand, it succeeded in winning the confidence and support of people at large. While they went forward to purge Hinduism of its accumulated ills, they were also prepared to combat the ruthless oppressions of new religious authority enjoying royal patronage. These dimensions of social protest and love of independence lent Bhakti a unique character.

The tradition begins with the Tamil Saiva saints, the Nayanmars. Marul Nikkiyar's (sixth century) life—better known as Appar—is in a way a metaphor of this combative spirit. Abandoning the family faith in Saivism, he embraced Jainism and became famous as Dharmasen in his youth. But in his ripe old age being humiliated by his new fellow-believers, he came back to the fold of his ancestral religion. However, he hardly expressed any contempt against his enemies in his poems. But his younger friend Sambandhar (seventh century), who was as good as a son to him, did not conceal his aversion :

Those Buddhists and mad Jains may slander speak.  
 Such speech befits the wand'ers from the way.  
 But He who came to earth and begged for alms,  
 He is the thief who stole my heart away.  
 The raging elephant charged down at Him ;  
 O marvel ! He but took and wore its hide ;  
 Madman men think Him, but He is the Lord  
 Who in great Brahmapuram doth abide.<sup>5</sup>

It may be borne in mind that of the three major kingdoms of South India then, the Cholas alone had been Saiva in faith. The Pallavas and the Pandyas were converted by these two poets, Appar and Sambandhar, from Jainism to Saivism. With Saivism gaining royal support and penetrating among the masses as well, the Jain-Buddhist monasteries were transformed into Saiva shrines. However, the Bhakti poets soon gave up their role of crusaders. Rather

than being involved in external struggles, they concentrated on attaining self-control and pacification of desires. In one of Appar's hymns we read :

The bond of lust I can not break ;  
     Desire's fierce torture will not die ;  
 My soul I can not stab awake  
     To scan my flesh with seeing eye.  
 I bear upon my load of deeds,  
     Load such as I can ne'er lay down.  
 Athihai Virattanam's Lord,  
     Weary of joyless life I've grown.<sup>6</sup>

The irresistible human infatuation with the flesh on the one hand and an indispensable rigour for self-discipline on the other, the perception of God's immeasurable bliss and the pitiable human limitation in appreciating it—the Bhakta's mind dangles between such opposites of the ideal and real. Bhakti poetry is the cry of the agonized soul born out of this tantalizing situation. The poets themselves knew full well what their lot was :

Don't you take on  
 this thing called Bhakti :  
     like a saw  
     it cuts when it goes  
     and it cuts again  
     when it comes.  
 If you risk your hand  
 with a cobra in a pitcher  
 will it let you  
 pass ?<sup>7</sup>

Like the Nayanmars, the Tamil Vaishnava poets, the Alvars, did not prescribe a repression of passions almost to a dead end, to the limit of toying with the idea of a death-wish. They discovered a pantheistic balance between Man and Nature. Alvar Tirumangai (ninth century) wrote :

'No penance for you my friends', he says,  
 'No penance, friends,  
 For you who wish to claim as your own  
 The world eternal.  
 No mortifying of the flesh,  
 No placing of life under duress.  
 No torturing of the five senses

That, for all that you can do,  
 Cleave to the body, not to be shaken off.  
 No more wasting and withering for you,  
 Instead your way lies there  
 Where the forest dances,  
 And the peacocks,  
 And nearby, dances the brook,  
 And the bright fish within it.  
 There across the fields, goes your way  
 Where lies Chitrakuta,  
 Mount of Beauty,  
 Flags dancing honey-sweet over the terraces'.<sup>8</sup>

From external Nature the poets gradually turned their eyes to matters internal. In the sanctum of their minds they created as it were a world of eternal bliss, a *mānasa-Vṛndāvana*. Poet Nammalvar (880-930), the last in the illustrious line, exemplified the process of such introversion :

The indwelling God is in all created things  
 and in all the religions professed by man ;  
 It is in vain to reach Him through the senses ;  
 and He defies mere intellectual cognition ;  
 Seek Him in the soul's sanctuary, the source of all life ;  
 In firm meditation, but free from disturbing mundane thought,  
 And the Lord can be secured for ever.<sup>9</sup>

The entire approach of Bhakti underwent a sea-change from around this time. Echoes of such sentiments may be easily found in various regional literatures. *Dvaitabhāva* or dualism began to ensue from the newly emergent philosophies received through the *Nāyaka-Nāyikī Saṃraga* of Tamil poetry. Andal (ninth century), the adopted daughter of Periyalvar, took Krishna to be her groom for life. That is why she refused to get married to any human being. So immersed in the vision of unity was she that she would not hesitate to wear around her neck the garland offered to the Lord. Her poems are full of references to that celestial nuptial :

The drums beat, the conch blew  
 'Neath the pearl-decked wedding place ;  
 Madhusudan, my Lord, the hope of all,  
 He came ; and I dreamt that He held my hand.<sup>10</sup>

The intensity of passion arouses a kind of sensuousness—yet not one of self-love, but of love for the Lord. While blowing His conch the poetess experiences a passionate contact with Him :

Smell they of myrrh ? or do they smell of lotus flowers ?  
His beautiful holy lips of coral, are they sweet ?  
How taste and smell the lips of Him who broke the tusk  
For I dearly want to know—say, white shell from the sea!<sup>11</sup>

This worship of the Lord in a feminine form familiar in the Vaishnava poems reached so deep into the creative psyche that even the Saiva poet Manikkavachakar (eighth century) could speak in such images and so intensely of submission :

O Kuyil small that does warble  
In the grove with honey-sweet rich fruit,  
Pay heed to this :  
The bounteous Lord who, spurning the heavens,  
Entered this Earth, and made men His own,  
The only One, who, not minding the flesh,  
Entered my heart and my experience became,  
The Bridegroom of Her  
Who won Him with gentle eyes that excel the fawn's,  
Do go and bid Him come hither.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Tamil Bhakti literature from the sixth to the twelfth century brought the Saiva and Vaishnava poets nearer. Faith and poetry were married in a fine frenzy. There were also a set of philosophical premises, but they seldom put the poetic ecstasy into shade. They never seemed to have been superimposed on or given preference to the yearnings of the soul. From Tamil, Bhakti spread to Marathi and Telugu along the two coastal lines. But by then the sastric prescriptions and ritual practices began to creep in. The redeeming factor, however, was the rise of an exquisite musical tradition around it. The wandering devotees and their songs not only dispelled the monotony and fear of the pilgrims, but they endowed the sacred sites with a unique character.

The route that Bhakti would take after the Nayanmars and the Alvars was no longer a matter of guess. It followed the footprints of the eighth century vedantin from Kaladi, Sankaracharya. The five monasteries set up by him at Badrinath, Dvarka, Nilachal, Sringeri and Kanchi clearly endorse a sense of strategy. And the obstacle imposed by the Vindhya could also be thus bypassed. It may be surmised that rather than discovering a new pathway, he undertook the much trodden route of the local traders and pilgrims. Of course,

the riverine passage was preferable to land routes where such choice existed, though, the poorer people used them quite extensively.

After nearly six centuries of mutual amity, the Saivas and the Vaishnavas fell out. Disgusted with the oppressions of the Saiva kings of the Chola dynasty, Ramanuja (twelfth century) left Srirangam and established two monasteries at Belur and Halevi in Karnataka. But even then the popularity of Lingayat Saivism among the common people in the region did not recede and found expression in the Kannada Vacanas. Devoid of royal patronage, Siva now became the God of the poor. Basavanna writes in one of his poems :

Those who have means will not devote them to the building  
of a temple to God Siva. Then I, though a poor man, will build  
Thee one, O Lord. My legs shall be the pillars, my body the  
shrine, my head the golden finial. Hearken, O Kudala-  
sangama Deva! The fixed temple of stone will come to an  
end ; but this movable temple of the spirit will never perish.<sup>13</sup>

Enshrining the image of Godhead in the inner soul, transplanting Him from without to within is the greatest contribution of Dravidian Bhakti to Indian literature.

Before Vaishnavism could take roots in Karnataka, it swayed the whole of Maharashtra. The holy city of Pandharpur, the seat of Vitthal, another name for Vishnu, near the border of the two states, became a meeting place of saints. Jnanadeva (1275-96) and Namadava (1270-1350) met here. Chaitanya (1486-1533) came here to see his sanyasin elder brother Visvarupa. If Srirangam was the centre of Bhakti activities in the early phase, then Pandharpur gained the same status among the devotees in the next. Though right from the beginning some non-Brahmin poets had got prominence, the Bhaktas at Pandharpur consciously did away with class prejudice. Chanting the Lord's name round the clock—faith in the redeeming power of the Name irrespective of caste and religion became the gospel of the new wave. Jnanadeva says in one of his *abhangas* :

Cry 'Hari', cry aloud,—  
Let the name ring ;  
So thou shalt merit gain  
Past reckoning.<sup>14</sup>

No specific hour is needed for that :

There needs not a propitious hour  
This name to cry.  
Lo, both who speaks it and who hears  
Are saved thereby.<sup>15</sup>

If the earlier Bhakti literature was more concerned with Sin-Penance-Redemption, its later phase was more society-oriented and could hence penetrate into the chasms of discriminatory social orders. The advent of Islamic power precipitated this change extraneously. Attracted by the spell of congregational chanting of the Name, people like the tailor Namadeva, the potter Gora, the gardener Samvata, the goldsmith Narhari, the untouchable Chokha, the barber Sena, the maid Janabai or the dancer Kanhapatra assembled at the altar at Pandharpur. Their life was naturally full of hardships which was further hardened by the oppressions of the upper class. Yet the Bhakti poet remained unswerving in his love for the Lord. As late as the seventeenth century the *kunbi* (farmer) Tukaram (1588-1649) describes this resolve in one of his poems :

What shall I eat now ? Where shall I go ?  
On whose support shall I count and live in the village ?  
The Patil is angry, the village folk angry,  
Who will bother about me now ?<sup>16</sup>

Yet he is determined :

Whether I live or perish, yet  
On Pandurang my faith is set.  
Thy feet, Lord, I will never forsake,  
To Thee this solemn vow I make.<sup>17</sup>

From Pandharpur Jnanadeva and Namadeva went out on their North Indian pilgrimage en route Dvarka. But though the routes remained open, Bhakti did not spread, strangely enough, from Maharashtra to Gujarat.

A parallel tradition of Bhakti in the later phase branched out from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. It originated as lore among the *abheri* community of Gujarat and moved eastward. It may be noted that Radha, who hails from this tradition, was not given a place of pride in Maharashtra. But chastened by the *Nāyaka-Nāyaki-Saṃrāga* of the South, she was immediately accepted in other parts of the country. Chaitanya's impact, especially in Bengal, consolidated her position in art and literature. Even before Chaitanya's southern pilgrimage, two aestheticians from the South, Rupa and Sanatana—later principal theoreticians among the six Goswamins of Vrindaban—were employed as *Sakar-Malik* and *Dabir-i-Khas* in the court of King Hussain Shah of Gaur. This proves beyond doubt that there had been a continuous mobility between the North and the South and that it was not confined to trade or vocation, that such mobility left an impact on ideas as well.

*Radhabhava* permeated the entire Vaishnava faith and movement in Bengal, so much so that Chaitanya himself was portrayed as an incarnation of

Radha. Svarup Damodara was the first to make that equation on the theoretical plane :

Śrī Rādhāyāḥ praṇayamahimā kīḍṛśōvānaivā-  
svādyo yenādbhūtamadhurimā kīḍṛśo vā maḍiyāḥ //  
saukhyāñcāsyāmadanubhavataḥ kīḍṛśaṃ veti lobhāt /  
tadbhāvādhyāḥ samajani śācīgarbhasindhau herīnduh //¹⁹

In poetry the resonance was not far off to hear. A sixteenth century poet Naraharidasa wrote :

Had he not been born, how could we realize Him?  
Had not Gauranga been there,  
Who could have made us know  
The splendours of Radha's love ?¹⁹

Notwithstanding the debate on the extent of exact impact, a marked difference may be noticed between the earlier and the later Bhakti poets. In the former, a formal distance was evident in describing the attributes of Godhead ; in the latter, He was as near as a relation. If the former emphasized the *aiśvarya* of the Lord, the latter highlighted the *mādhya*. This intimate relationship was the result of a marriage between the pure Bhakti of the South and the Bhagavata Bhakti of the North. Whether a Saiva or a Vaishnava, a Sakta or a Bhagavata, he might have had many changes in his circumstances with the passage of time ; his vocabulary shifted from ornate formulas to non-embellishment per se ; his mode of worship transformed from distant devotion to complete submission. But any shift in position could barely be seen in the inmost attitude or feeling. The Kannada poet and the maker of Karnatic music, Purandardasa—a devotee of Pandharpur's Vitthala—carried forward the tradition of Nama or the endless repetition of the Lord's name. No sacrifice, no abstinence, no prayer, no offering could achieve what the mesmeric name alone could spell :

Oh buy sugar-candy, my candy so good,  
For those who have tasted say nought is so sweet  
As the honey-like name of the God-like Vishnu.²⁰

The *Ekanamasarana Dharma* of Sankaradeva (1449-1569) is a polygenetic parallel to the same realization. What Nanak did for the Punjab, Ezuttacchan for Kerala, was done by Sankaradeva for Assam : he linked the region with the



pan-Indian consciousness. Two pilgrimages acquainted him closely with the Southern sources of Bhakti. He based his gospels or *Ekanama* on the lines of the *Bhāgavata* in the main. But congregational chanting was the most important feature of his faith. He wrote :

Tapa japa yajna mahadana tirthasnana  
Koti bhago nahi Kṛṣṇakathar samana  
Yahara mukhata thake hari hena nama  
Ganga Gaya Kasi Puskarato nahi kama.<sup>21</sup>

(Penance, meditation, sacrifice, great gifts and holy bath are not even like the millionth fraction of the Name of God (Krishna-lore). One, in whose speech the Name of Hari is present, need not go on pilgrimage to the Holy Ganges, Gaya, Kasi or Pushkara.) But he did more. He added a new dimension to the Bhakti movement by translating the devotional lyrical spirit into the visual work of performing arts. The form of *Ankiya Nats* was extremely congenial to the dissemination of *Nama*. In the absence of definitive evidence it may only be conjectured that Chaitanya and his disciples in Bengal and Orissa might have gathered the idea of presenting the exploits of Krishna in a dramatic mode from him.

The late Saiva synthesis culled from *Śiva Purāṇa* and folklore also found passage from the South to the North, where coming into contact with the Tantric Saktism, it flourished into excellent lyrical outpourings. By the time it reached Bengal in the eighteenth century, references to the then socio-economic and political turmoils became obvious ; a tension surfaced through a new set of images, but the inmost humility never failed to impress :

I'm not calling you Mother anymore,  
All you give me is trouble.  
I had a home and a family, now  
I'm a beggar—what will you think of  
Next, my wild-haired Devi ?<sup>22</sup>

The final link between Vrindaban and Dvarka, at the other extreme, was established by none other than Mira (1532-1623). The correspondence between Tulsidas and herself at a crucial juncture of her life evinces a change in the philosophical undertone of Bhakti. Mira implored Tulsi to tell her what to do : should she bear with the oppressions of the in-laws or renounce family life ?

•                   Sri Tulsi sukha-nidana, dukha-harana gusañ/  
barahibar pranama karuñ, aba haro soka samudai //

gharke svajana hamare jete saban upadhi badhai /  
 sadhusanga aru bhajana karata, mohi deta kalesa mahai //  
 balapanete Miraki nahi Giridharlal Nitai /  
 so tau ab chutata nahi kyoñ huñ lagi lagana bariai //  
 mere matapitake sama hau, haribhajana sukhadai /  
 hamko kaha ucita karibo hai, so likhiyo samujhai //23

Tulsi was unequivocal in his answer :

jake priya na Rama-Vaidehi /  
 tyajiye tahi koti vairi sama, yadyapi parama sanehi.<sup>24</sup>

He also explained the underlying rationale of his argument :

so janani so pita ōoi bhrata, so bhamina so suta so hita mere /  
 soi sago so sakha soi sevaka, so guru so sura sahiba cero //  
 so Tulsipriya prana samana, kaha louñ batai kahoñ bahutero /  
 jo tyaji gehako dehaho neha, saneha so Ramalo hoyo sabero //24

Bhakti here comes back to the fold of Vedantism even if in a different garb. What was told in a negative vein in Sankara's "Bhavānyaṣṭakam": "na tāto na mātā na bandhurna dātā / na putro na putrī na bhṛtyo nā bhārtā / na jāyā na vidyā na vṛttirmamaivam / gatistvaṃ gatistvaṃ tvameka bhavānī"<sup>25</sup> was virtually turned positive by Tulsidas. Thus ended the process of Aryanization of Bhakti in North India.

This fundamental aspect of Indian culture was noticed by Rabindranath as early as 1912. In "A Vision of India's History" he wrote :

The transcendental thought of the Aryan by its marriage with the emotional and creative art of the Dravidian gave birth to an off-spring which was neither fully Aryan, nor Dravidian, but Indian. ... Through such Aryan and Dravidian assimilation Indian civilization has affected a combination of Truth and Beauty, of Jnana and Rasa, of the one and the many in its fold.<sup>26</sup>

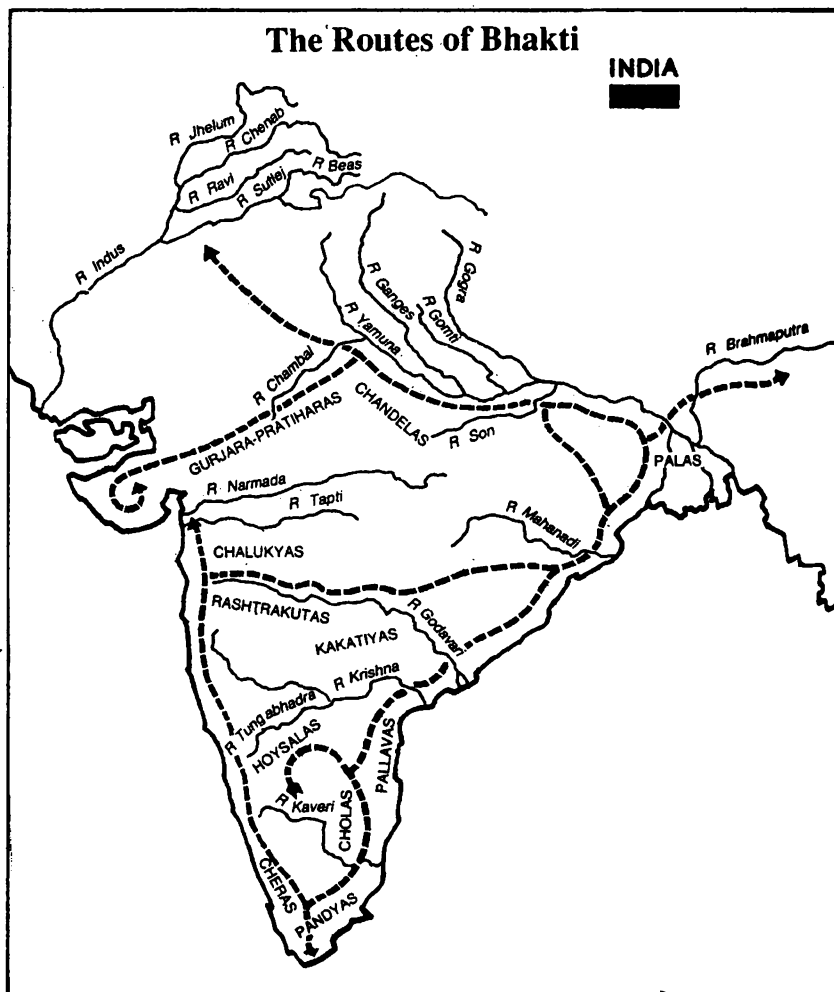
If we follow the footprints of the Bhakti poets through their dense desolate pathway, we too would reach the same conclusions. In the vocabulary of the mystics we may say that its appearance (*śrīrūpa*) is Aryan, reality (*svarūpa*) Dravidian.

## NOTES

1. "Bhakti-Nārada Samāgana", *Padmā Purāṇa*, Uttara Khaṇḍa, Ślokaś 50-71.
2. Popular bhajan recorded by Juthika Ray.
3. D.C. Sircar (ed.), *Bhakti Cult and Ancient Indian Geography* (Calcutta : University of Calcutta, 1970) and J.N.Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* (London : Oxford University Press, 1920).
4. Swapan Majumdar (ed.), *Influences on Hindu Civilisation* (Calcutta : Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1978).
5. F. Kingsbury and G.E. Phillips (eds.), *Hymns of the Tamil Saivite Saints* (Calcutta : Association Press, 1921), p. 27.
6. Ibid., p. 45.
7. A.K. Ramanujan (trans.), *Speaking of Siva* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1979), p. 79. The poem is by the Kannada Virasaiva poet Basavanna (twelfth century).
8. V. Raghavan (ed.), *Devotional Poets and Mystics*, Part I (New Delhi : Publications Division, 1978), pp. 32-3.
9. A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance* (Bombay : Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1979), p. 54.
10. Raghavan, p. 45.
11. C. Jesudasan and H. Jesudasan, *A History of Tamil Literature* (Calcutta : YMCA Publishing House, 1961), p. 108.
12. G. Varmananathan, *Manikkavachakar* (New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1976), p. 52.
13. E.P. Rice, *A History of Kanarese Literature* (Calcutta : Association Press, 1921), p. 57.
14. N. Macnicol, *Psalms of Maratha Saints* (Calcutta : Association Press, 1919), p. 38.
15. Ibid., p. 40.
16. B. Nemade, *Tukaram* (New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1980), p. 32.
17. Macnicol, p. 44.
18. Krishnadas Kaviraj, *Chaitanya-Charitamrita*, Adi Lila, Chapter 4.
19. Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay (ed.), *Vaishnava Padavali* (Calcutta : Sahitya Samsad, 1980), pp. 150-1. Translation by the present author.
20. Rice, p. 82.
21. Keshavananda Dev Goswami, *Life and Teachings of Mahapurusha Sankaradeva* (Patiala : Punjabi University, 1982), p. 29.
22. Leonard Nathan & Clinton Seely (trans.), *Grace and Mercy in Her Wild Hair* (Boulder : Great Eastern, 1982), p. 35.
23. Manomohan Bandyopadhyay, *Dohavali*, Vol. I (Calcutta : Cotton Press, 1931), pp. xxv-xxvi.
24. Ibid.
25. Svami Gambhirananda (ed.), *Stavakusumanjali* (Calcutta : Udbodhana, 1980), p. 334.
26. "Bharatvarse Itihaser Dhara", *Parichay*, Rabindra-Rachanavali 18 (Calcutta : Visvabharati, 1978), pp. 444-6. Translation by the present author.

The title is borrowed from a fragment of a mystical poem of the 'Sahebdhanis', a religious sect of Bengal (courtesy : Sudhir Chakravarti).

Drawn by Devavrata Ghosh under present author's supervision, this is a telescopic map where a thousand years have been deliberately compressed to give a comprehensive picture of the Routes of Bhakti. The word 'Bhakti', too, has not been used in the strictest technical term.



## TAGORE TODAY

(FOR READERS WHO HAVE NO ACCESS TO BENGALI)

*Amiya Dev*

Relevance is a loaded word. I speak Rabindranath Tagore's language. In writing it after fifty years of his death I may not consciously imitate him. I may even try to move away from him. Yet I know that if I attain any readability it is because of his enormous and inexhaustible legacy. This is one kind of relevance. But there is another kind that is not so obvious. A few years ago while convalescing in a hospital bed I saw two successive deaths in the bed next to mine. The first was that of an elderly man, a miserable bag of pain whom his doctors had given up on. One morning he was discovered dead. As they were putting a shroud over him two lines of a Tagore song bubbled up in my mind—words of epiphany and peace. The second death was that of a young man who had been brought there with a number of knife wounds. They had sewn up his gashes but he was still struggling for life. On the third morning he began to sink. They screened him in and tried every means of resuscitation. As he lay gasping the same two lines of the same Tagore song again bubbled up in my mind. I must have been humbled by the near brush I myself had with death a few days ago, for I would normally not think of Rabindranath on such occasions. In fact I had been quite vociferous against the overuse of Rabindranath in the media and public. But lying by death I now realized the depth of his words. This had nothing to do with the daily waking to Tagore tunes or the daily going to bed ; it was a true waking to his undying gifts.

If this is reception *à la* Konstanz then this is reception of a very high order, for rarely do a poet's words reach such depths of the middle class psyche. But that does not mean that the everyday canonization is no reception at all. What a successor poet had said some fifty years ago about Rabindranath being the success-giving god Ganesa of recent Bengal still holds—we can think of few social rituals where his words are not invoked. There may as such be an excess, but the excess is part of the social history which alone can explain why each year the Rabindra birthday celebrations become more and more obsessive with not only hundreds turning up at the morning congregation on the ancestral grounds but newer and newer forms of homage being devised. Hans Robert Jauss' 'Provokation' would surely recognize this reception as history—how would it not when aware that two sovereign countries' national anthems are made up of his words and tunes!

But reception is one thing and immanence another, and if I now turn to the immanent Tagore it is not because I am done with the Tagore reception but

because I see his surer relevance in his immanence. And I am not speaking of his world or overall Indian relevance alone but of his Bengal relevance as well which by all token is immense. There is no area of Bengali life and culture today which is not still illuminated by his thought, be it the village cooperative and rural banking or mother tongue education. No prophet and no system-builder, his thought was primarily a problematization of history ; and since the fall-out of that colonial history is still undiminished his thought can still sustain us. But to sustain is not to overwhelm, and as long as that is recognized there is no fear of idolatry.

To be sustained is to be ourselves able to recognize the problematic and that is where our relation today to some of the seminal Tagore texts is defined. One such text is *Gora*, a novel written in 1909 set in post-1857 Bengal. In today's parlance we may mistake its prime protagonist for a fundamentalist, for he insists on Hindu orthodoxy and makes a severe critique of Brahmo liberalism. But unlike his foster father who has gone revivalist in expiation as it were of the wild oats of his youth—a familiar story for Bengal Westernization, and unlike his vociferous disciples who are only interested in the loud but hollow rhetoric, he is motivated by patriotism, for he too had begun as a liberal and would perhaps have continued so if not a Christian missionary had invited a newspaper debate on Christianity versus Hinduism (reminiscent of the Bankim-Hastie letters). But *Gora's* orthodoxy is in conflict with his dynamism—the more he offers leadership the more he comes up against caste and rituals, and the only resolution that can come is a kind of denationalization, his discovery that he was not even born Indian, let alone an upper caste Hindu. He realizes that true Indianness is not in birth but in election, in becoming, that the true Indian is neither Hindu nor Brahmo in either's intolerant arrogance but the Hindu or Brahmo (Tagore has only a Hindu-Brahmo frame in this text) that is virtually ostracized from the fold. Thus both orthodoxy and 'enlightenment' are problematized and problematized not as such but in the context of colonial history. Both the orthodox Hindu and the 'enlightened' Brahmo would accept the colonial domination ; it is only the out-of-fold Hindu or Brahmo that would question it.

This is the second time that I am speaking of *Gora* in the space of six months and saying about the same thing. But that should not amaze us for relevance is equivalent to such haunting. One keeps hearing the echoes of the long discourses between *Gora* and his friend Binoy or *Gora* and his beloved Sucharita and one keeps being swayed by the Savonarola-Lorenzo Medici-like dialectic à la Thomas Mann. One keeps invoking the image of *Gora* with a stick in hand and barefooted confronting the British magistrate with a clamour for justice during the magistrate's evening walk in the company of the self-appointed school master of the Brahmo Samaj, Haran, who believes in the providence of

British rule and English education in India. One also keeps invoking the image of the tall young Gora taking long strides on a lonely afternoon back towards the village whose militant menfolk are all on the run except a harmless Hindu barber who is left behind to look after the women and the children including a Muslim neighbour's son in his own household—a matter of great repugnance to the champions of religious purity and caste. Obviously such relevance is not restricted to Bengal, for orthodoxy and 'enlightenment' are wider India's problems and have a special point today in the wake of religious fundamentalism on the one hand and the espousal of a relatively loose command-free economy on the other with an open invitation to multinational investment. The 'enlightened' notion of development in the late nineteenth century was essentially not very different from today's 'global' notion and perhaps the revivalists then and the revivalists now are made of similar nationalist chips. Tagore's relevance to today's India is not tantamount to an answer to today's problems but to a cue to today's problematics. We must fight fundamentalism but not by sacrificing 'Indianness'. We must at no costs be 'globalized' but not by putting the clock back.

Not Indian problematics alone, some of world problematics too may have a cue in Rabindranath. I would think of two texts in particular, both plays, *Achalayatan* (The Immovable Institution) and *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*). The first was published in 1912 and is the story of an institution that was once set up to pursue the quest for truth but now only pursues prohibitions. By excluding nature and the greater part of humanity, and being absolutely walled in, it has been reduced to obsessive rituals and cud chewing. And such is the power of rules, prohibitory rules, that one is totally hypnotized by them and doesn't dare dream of non-observance. It is this crippling of the human spirit that is highlighted in this text. But the human spirit is ultimately indomitable and a boy materializes who refuses all mindless rituals and responds to the calls of nature and humanity, ironically the younger brother of the staunchest ritualist. At one level the play is this boy's—he opens and closes it. Doubt is also voiced by the institution's principal who is not sure that its structure has not been detrimental to its avowed purpose. He is now waiting for the guru (the play was retitled *Guru* for the stage), the preceptor, who had once inducted him here. And the guru does come, but he turns out to be the companion counsellor of the near untouchables, the Sonapamsus, that live outside and till the ground, fish and temper iron, and are full of life and youthful defiance. It is with them that the guru comes levelling the institution walls and smashing the doors and bolts. He is also the friend cum spiritual guide of the low-born Dharbhakas who too have no access to the institution grounds but are docile enough to accept their lowly station. But the guru demolishes the old structure to let a new structure be gradually built in its place in which the leadership is given to the rebellious boy

with whom the whole thing began. If necessary that new structure too will be demolished in its turn, and there is no room for any ambiguity here. Tagore is not denying institutions, Tagore is not denying rules. But when the rules take over and the institution becomes its own end, when the human spirit for whose sake the rules in the first place have been framed and the institution built is stifled, a revolution has to be launched and that has to be motivated from within. It is in this dialectic of institution and spirit that Tagore seems to be pitching history, and this dialectic is continuous. In other words there is no end to revolution.

It may not be idle to approach some of the recent political changes in the world in the light of this notion of revolution. Again, I am not placing Rabindranath on a prophet's pedestal. What he signifies in his text is the problematic of institutions. I am saying that this problematic may help us approach the problematic of recent political change. In his own way Tagore deconstructed institutional power ; our deconstruction of our complexities today in terms of power generation and power accumulation and the historical processes by which that power is eventually contended will naturally be different. Tagore's relevance doesn't lie in analogy but in his problematization. He reaches out to us not because we have an exact image of our own time in him—I am not proposing a reductive and an absolutist view of history—but because we have an image of the problematic of his own time in him. Relevance is not in the supposed transcendence of history ; relevance is in the way that history is treated. This is further seen in the other drama text I have in mind, *Raktakarabi*, published in 1924/26. Here revolution is on the very card itself. Set in a mining town it deals with production relations. Its language is not straight realist, still industrial inequality, exploitation and dehumanization are depicted. The history too of how agricultural labour has been lured to industry is signified and Tagore has a critique here of the ecological imbalances of industrialization. In a preface he wrote to his text he makes a distinction between the plough-based and the wresting-oriented civilization, between agriculture and industry—one inducing the earth to itself yield its riches, the other taking those riches from the earth by force. But Tagore does not stop with this critique which may put him in European Romantic company, he goes further to problematize industry as such.

There is a King in the centre of this text, but he keeps hidden behind an impenetrable mesh. No one can be strained through his ever-watchful officials who have turned him into a pure sign. In fact the power that originated in him is now wielded by them. The dialectic is thus set not between the exploited and the exploiter alone but between the King and his machinery as well, the machinery that he had himself set up. Things begin with a young woman named Nandini arriving from the fields and being stopped at the mesh. Undaunted she



begins communication with the King through the mesh window. She is so full of life and so reminiscent of the freedom of the fields that a stir is created in the town. The dehumanized miners are awakened to the truth of their condition. A few are thrown up to give leadership to that discontent though a few others, in the intensity of their struggle, take her to be a part of the official instrument of deception and domination. But she has been brought here by the King's officials to lure in her beloved, Ranjan, the veritable incarnation of the soul of the fields, signifying the ultimate victory of industry over agriculture. Him we never see but hear of, and true to his name (the hue giver) he touches up the whole place with the spirit of freedom and rebellion. To crush that and to cure the King of his growing restlessness, caused by the fatigue over his alienated surplus energy and by his pull to Nandini, the officials feed Ranjan to him as a kind of ultimate fodder. The inevitable happens—a monster with that surplus energy, so creative and so destructive at the same time, he kills Ranjan because of Ranjan's defiance. When the realization comes of what he has done ("I have killed Ranjan, I have destroyed the spirit of youth.") and of how his machinery has been deceiving him, he breaks out from his mesh and joins hands with the labourers who have risen against him and his officials. With them he goes to fight his own army called in by the officials. The text ends on a rallying slogan raised in the names of Ranjan and Nandini.

Tagore does not deny industry as such, the human energy that motivates industry. But he problematizes it for its tentacles. For it is these tentacles that not only suck out the life-blood of the industrial labour but also eat up the parent energy. Tagore's crusade is against industrial management which has a human face but which only perpetrates inhumanity. All the evils of the industrial order—the alienation, the dehumanization and the exploitation—are its doing accomplished in a ruthlessly organized manner. At the same time it sets up the surplus industrial energy as a veritable monster imputing all industrial torture to that and smoothing out the wrinkles of the actual industrial monstrosity by small mercies and petty awards. The agricultural fields that form the background of Tagore's 'Yakshapuri', the ore-lovers' town, are no argument for a return, they are part of the history of industrialization. Tagore is different from the anti-mechanists in this matter, from Gandhi for instance ; for he does not think that the brute machine is the true enemy of the human spirit but brutish humanity that hides its brutishness under the veneer of organization. Even in his supposedly Gandhi-inspired play *Muktadhara* (1922 : The Source) he does not go up stream. History motivates a dam to stem the water of a river, a praiseworthy feat of engineering, but it is history again that motivates its rupture when it turns out to be an instrument of economic and political subjugation. Dams are to be built, but dams are to be unbuilt too. That is not going back, no romantic glorification of the past ; that is only looking into the

problematic of dams. It is part of Tagore's relevance that he did not subscribe to the 'Enlightenment' idea of progress which has not only proved to have flattened out the dialectic of history but entailed extensive coercion. No one would deny now that colonialism was a product of industrialism, that though the colonies have all been liberated colonialism is still alive in a surrogate form, and that the 'progress' of yesteryear and today's 'development' are synonymous. If the 'developing' nations go on importing 'development' from the 'developed' nations without any discrimination and without being conscious of the price, then soon a crisis will materialize. Maybe that crisis has already set in, for the signs in some of the developing countries are quite ominous. I once met an Asian neighbour in a railway station in India who lamented to me the fact of his country's absolute dependence on other countries for consumer goods. His slacks he said were American, his shirt was from Taiwan, his wristwatch Swiss, his pipe French, tobacco Dutch, and the pair of sandals he was wearing had been bought in India. One can take this assembly as a parallel to Tagore's famous fable on colonial education called "Totakahini" or "The Parrot's Training" where the parrot eventually dies from the continuous stuffing of 'advanced' knowledge down its throat.

In 1917 Tagore brought out a slim volume called *Nationalism* containing his American lectures on the subject. These lectures had been written during his trip to Japan in 1916 and they reflected the spirit of what he had felt and said in his public addresses in Japan of Japan's excessive dependence on industrialism. He defined nationalism as arrogance bred out of industrial supremacy and aggression. In measure of immanence this slim volume is most potent. Much of what has since happened in the world in these seventy-five years, the two global wars and many localized ones, the cold war and the arms race, the continuous economic 'matsyanyaya' with big eating small and the intolerance and bargaining at all levels of international relations, seems to have been contained in its frame of reference. I am not claiming Tagore to be an absolute visionary who foresaw things; I am only saying that his understanding of history was most acute and comprehensive. Speaking of colonialism as an offshoot of Western nationalism he said at one place: "You, the people of the West, who have manufactured this abnormality, can you imagine the desolating despair of this haunted world of suffering man possessed by this ghastly abstraction of the organizing man? Can you put yourself in the position of the peoples, who seem to have been doomed to an eternal damnation of their own humanity, who not only must suffer continual curtailment of their manhood, but even raise their voice in paeans of praise for the benignity of a mechanical apparatus in its interminable parody of providence?" (p.17) [I have quoted these words before and] I quote these words here as an instance of the tenor of these lectures and also to supplement my reading of *Raktakarabi* above as a

critique of industrial organization rather than of industrialism as such. Besides these words seem to carry a relevance to the question of international economic inequality today and the supposed attempts at rationalization through international agencies. Tagore seems to be hinting that we all have a right to dignity and that no country can give it up under any circumstances, not even for the highest material benefits. Tagore lived long but not long enough to see the era of international aid. If he had lived to see it, would he have approved of it? One of the things he throughout upheld is uplift from below, not above. And one of the ideas he throughout propounded is that of the cooperative.

For him the cooperative was one of the main factors of the Russian regeneration after the revolution. In *Rashiyar Chithi*, the letters he wrote on Russia upon his visit in 1930, he speaks primarily of cooperative farming and the revolution it had brought about in the life of the Russian peasantry. But he also speaks of the cooperative spirit pervading elsewhere in Soviet life. In fact what he says here in praise of the cooperative management of industries is further proof of his position on industrialism. He seems opposed to it as long as it is capital owned and entails exploitation. But if it is owned by the labourers themselves and is meant for their good, then he has no purist qualms about it. The view that land is ultimately the tillers' should also be true of the machine. And naturally this is tied up with his notions of the rich and the poor, the rich that live off the labour of the poor and the poor that live for the sake of the rich. In Soviet Russia, says Tagore in 1930, this difference has been abolished. There are no longer any rich and those who were poor before 1917 and were in every way deprived have not only a livelihood but a right to the amenities of a welfare society, holiday and healthcare, as well as a right to the arts, no matter how high and onetime exclusive. Tagore feels that this revolution too has been achieved greatly through a wide dissemination of education, particularly to those Asian republics which had a very low level of literacy as well as crass poverty. All this has a special point for Tagore because his India has been deprived of mass education and been plagued by social and economic inequality of all sorts. In fact Tagore's appreciation of the Soviet achievement in 1930 is relative to his critique of the British denial of basic rights to colonial Indians. It is from his own history that he looks at the history of Soviet Russia.

But this *Anschauung* is not altogether free of problematization, for he does apprehend a suppression of individuality under prototypes. He is not also sure that with the perennial issue of one versus many unresolved the system will eventually sustain. Yet he knows that it has brought about a revolution by eradicating perennial social and economic evils for which it deserves an encomium from all, particularly from those who do not hope to achieve anything comparable in so short a time. We must not forget that the *Letters from Russia* were addressed to Bengalis and Indians and were fervently anticolonial in spirit. Besides the *Letters* uphold his lifelong ideal of the cooperative. At the

present juncture when many of us are still baffled by the official dissolution of the Soviet Union and are trying to understand this event, and when some of us are besieged by the doubt if socialism should not sustain as a sound order of the day, Tagore may be of immense help to us. He may provide us with a truly historical perspective, devoid of either idolatry or debunking. In any case this is not a moment of jubilation though that does not mean that we should go nostalgic and be keening. This is the moment when we should reaffirm our faith in history—the history that makes us and the history that we make. Tagore's is a text that may steer us to that act of faith. And such is its relevance, six decades after its publication, which is not saying little.

I am not saying that Tagore had a message and that if the world had heeded it the world would have been a better place. I am only saying that Tagore is still very relevant to us—relevant in an immediate way. That is, we can still read him without much gloss and readily understand him. Some three decades ago the Polish critic Jan Kott brought out a book on Shakespeare called *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* in English translation which is now a classic. I am not proposing a 'Tagore Our Contemporary' of that kind, a contemporary re-interpretation. It is our own time that I am dealing with using Tagore as a perspective, his texts as signs. My purpose is to understand ourselves, not Tagore as such. Unlike Thomas Mann's "Journey with Don Quixote" which did not let him see Rome at all upon his first visit to the eternal city, our journey with Tagore would let us see India and the world better. Instead of being blotted out the here and the now would be illuminated. Such, I submit, is the light of Tagore, his immanence. Immanence is the meaning that radiates. But immanence is also the meaning that pervades. It is this second immanence that I am assigning to Tagore, naturally on the basis of the first. And here lies his final relevance today.

# THE IDEA OF OUTSIDER IN TWO INDIAN PLAYS : EVAM INDRAJIT AND TUGHLAQ

*Arundhati Bandyopadhyay*

In an afterword to his novel *The Outsider*, Albert Camus wrote of his protagonist, "... the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game. In this sense he is an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual."<sup>1</sup> Meursault, who appears in the earlier *A Happy Death* as the man who commits a murder to escape his meaningless existence as a shipping clerk, is accused by society in the later novel for not murdering a strange Arab but because he fails to conform to the hypocritical norms of life and behaviour which it prescribes. Camus' condemned hero personifies twentieth century anonymity. In a materially-oriented, indifferent society which seeks to reduce the individual to a cog in the system or a cipher in the mass existence of a crowd, the existential hero is not only alienated from his surroundings, but also from his own deepest being which is continually being levelled out by the factitiousness of his circumstances.

It is not only in the context of the immediate everyday environment that the existential hero feels alienated but also in relation to the greater cosmic world. It is his consciousness of himself as a unique and free entity, a concentrate of immense potential, that makes him an exile in his own elements. From this consciousness of being springs the feeling of anguish which confronts the individual with his responsibility to himself and the call to grasp his authentic being. Multiple possibilities remain open to the existential hero and it is for him to exert his choice to establish his essential identity. Yet man has no fixed essence other than his consciousness of being in-the-world.<sup>2</sup> Every individual lives through a number of chosen and renewed acts which give shape to his essence. Thus existence precedes essence. Herein enters the greatest paradox of the human condition : Death. Not only does death terminate existence, but it brings into focus the absurdity of human freedom, choice or responsibility, as the ultimate limit to all man's striving and aspirations.

*Evam Indrajit* (1962) is probably the first play in Bengali which explored existentialist concerns. An acute consciousness of the meaninglessness of middle-class life is expressed as an existentialist question. The entire play is structured as an attempt to find dramatic content in the drab and formless lives of the representatives of the urban middle-class, Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal. The writer, a sutradhara-like character, belongs to the same milieu, yet

seems to have a singular existence through the choice of his creative vocation. His persistent efforts to find a unique individual in his surroundings lead him to Indrajit who pretends to be Nirmal in an endeavour to disown his very uniqueness. Amal, Vimal and Kamal are easily swallowed up in the middle-class routine, but Indrajit is unable to relate himself to the trivialities of the life around him. Expressing his desire for a world that transcends the immediate, he says,

There must be a world outside geography. It's not here. But it'll be somewhere far away—outside—beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Pitted against the social norms and customs which circumscribe his life to well-defined limits, Indrajit declares,

One can hate rules. Why should they be there at all ? (p. 21)

When Manasi, his cousin, the woman he loves and wants to marry in the face of social censure, asks him,

Who are you supposed to be fighting ?

Indrajit answers,

The World! The people around us! What you call society. (p. 22)

At the source of Indrajit's anguish can be discerned an awareness of the disparity between his self and his world. While Amal, Vimal and Kamal go through the monotonous job-marriage-children-promotion pattern, Indrajit remains alienated, the dreamer hoping to escape the dreary insignificance of his reality. Like Meursault in *A Happy Death*, Indrajit becomes a wanderer in search of a meaning for life. In his essay, "The Absurd Man", Camus exemplifies the absurd individual through the figure of a traveller;<sup>4</sup> Indrajit the traveller fails to settle down to the meaningless monotony of his existence. His consciousness of the absurdity of his life is embodied in the following conversation with the Writer :

Indrajit. You look at the starlit sky and you think of what astronomy tells us—about the insignificance of this minute earth in the solar system. What's this human life worth, sticking to it like germs to a speck ? Still, if one thought of all this all the time, one wouldn't live.

Writer. Yet you do think of it!

Indrajit. Can't help it. But there are times when I think life is vast, when I forget how ephemeral my life is in the total flow of time—a mere second. I forget that my existence is a pointless particle of dust. I start believing that nothing is more valuable than my life in this world.

Writer. That's nature's greatest gift to us—this ability to forget. It helps us to live.

Indrajit. But it's not enough! It's the gift of the Tree of Knowledge. The starlit sky confuses everything. (pp. 40-1)

Indrajit soon realizes the futility of his search. He describes himself as walking on two parallel railway tracks which give an illusion of converging to a point before him. But as he moves forward, the point recedes further and further. Indrajit attempts to merge into the faceless herd, to become another conformist, Nirmal. At this point in the play he is confronted by the Writer who emerges as his alter-ego. The writer points out to Indrajit that he cannot save himself through conformism :

Writer. . But you are not looking for promotion—or building a house—or developing a business scheme. How can you be Nirmal ? ... You and I can't be Nirmals ... For us there is only the road. We shall walk. I know nothing to write about—still I shall have to write. You have nothing to say—still you will have to talk. Manasi has nothing to live for—she will have to live. For us there is only the road—so walk on. We are the cursed spirits of Sisyphus. We have to push the rock to the top—even if it just rolls down. ... We must live. We must walk. We know no sacred place. Yet we must go on with the pilgrimage ... There's no respite. (pp. 59-60)

Realizing the truth of this, Indrajit intones with Manasi :

Forget the questions  
Forget the grief,  
And have faith  
In the road—  
The endless road. (p. 60)

In his essay entitled "The Absurd Man" Camus characterizes the prototype as, "Assured of his temporarily limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future and his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span

of his lifetime."<sup>5</sup> This is the central idea in Camus' re-interpretation of the ancient myth of Sisyphus. He writes of the condemned hero : "Sisyphus is the absurd hero ... His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing ... If the myth is tragic, that is because the hero is conscious."<sup>6</sup> Camus then relates the fate of this ancient figure to that of modern man : "The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition, ... the lucidity that was to constitute the torture at the same time crowns his victory."<sup>7</sup> Camus asserts that Sisyphus is happy because "the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."<sup>8</sup>

While Indrajit may be regarded as the existentialist hero personified in the common man, Tughlaq, who is the protagonist of Girish Karnad's play, may be looked upon as a special category of the absurd man : the conqueror. Camus sees the conqueror as the man in whom action and contemplation have united. The conqueror is the idealist who dreams of remaking man and the earth, knowing at the same time that this is impossible. He knows that "nothing of the conqueror lasts, not even his doctrines."<sup>9</sup>

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) portrays an intensely self-aware emperor who fits Camus' concept of the conqueror in whom heightened sensibility has been united with an initiative for action. From the very outset of the play Tughlaq chooses to establish a unique identity for himself and his kingdom. He questions the very essence of this identity :

... I wear the royal robes. I have honoured myself with the title of Sultan. But what gives me the right to call myself a king ? Am I a king only because I am the son of a king ? Is it because I can make the people accept my laws and the army move to my commands ? Or can self-confidence alone justify it ?<sup>10</sup>

Only through exercising his freedom of choice and the performance of responsible acts does Tughlaq want to give form to his essence. Like Camus' conqueror, he considers remaking man and the earth as the emperor's first duty :

I had something to give, to teach, that would have opened the eyes of history. And I have to do it in this one life. Before losing that I have to make them listen. (p. 56)

But whenever he speaks of his ideals to his subjects, to his advisers or his friends, he is totally misunderstood. His historian friend Barani, his loyal adviser Nazib and his affectionate step-mother only partially understand or



fulfil his intellectual and emotional needs, for they are each a reflection of a certain aspect of his own multi-dimensional character. Tughlaq himself is conscious of his alienation from people who surround him. Though acutely proud of his distinctiveness, Tughlaq craves total communion with his subjects. Immediately after speaking of his elitist love for the subtlest poetry, he expresses his longing for oneness with his people whom he elsewhere refers to as cattle :

... Then again I want to climb up, up to the top of the tallest tree in the world and call out to my people : Come my people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries. Let me share your joys ... Let's be the light and cover up the earth with greenery. Let's be darkness and cover up the boundaries of nations. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all! (p.10)

He also yearns for harmony with nature and the universe. He describes a rare moment when he was in total accord with the universe :

One night I was standing on the ramparts of the old fort here. There was a torch near me flapping its wild wings and scattering golden feathers on everything in sight. Suddenly something happened—as though someone had cast a spell. The torch, the gate, the fort and the sky—all melted and merged and flowed in my bloodstream with the darkness of the night. The moment shed its symbols, its questions and answers, and stood naked and calm where the stars throbbed in my veins. I was the earth, was the grass, was the smoke, was the sky. Suddenly a sentry called from far : 'Attention! Attention!' And to that challenge the half burnt torch and the half-built gate fell apart. (p. 53)

The incident Tughlaq narrates aptly captures the predicament of the existentialist hero who, at the moment of communion with the universe becomes aware of his separation from the world and from his own deepest being. This is the experience of nothingness as Sartre defines it in his *Being and Nothingness* : "The being of consciousness qua consciousness is to exist at a distance from itself as a presence to itself, and this empty distance which being carries in its being is Nothingness."<sup>11</sup> The discovery of the chasm which separates him from his world and makes him a misfit in his time, space and milieu strikes Tughlaq with an existential anguish. His uniqueness which had been an object of pride at the beginning of his career becomes a source of constant torment as the play progresses. It finds voice after he kills his trusted follower and official Shihabuddin : "Why must this happen Barani ? Are all those I trust condemned to go down in history as traitors ? What is happening ? Tell me, Barani, will my

reign be nothing more than a tortured scream which will stab the night and melt away in silence ?" (p. 43) When he is misunderstood by a common sentry to whom he tries to communicate his agony, Tughlaq says: "It's not your fault. You are also one of them." (p. 54)

The tragedy of his situation becomes poignant when at the end of the play he is faced with Aziz, the petty criminal who has absurdly perverted all Tughlaq's idealistic intentions. In answer to Barani's question as to why he released Aziz, Tughlaq replies, "All your life you wait for someone who understands you. And then—you meet him—punishment for wanting too much!" (p. 83) When even Barani deserts him he seeks solace in his own defeated and disturbed idealism which is nothing other than madness in the eyes of the world: "All I need now is myself and my madness—madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scare-crow violence." (p. 85)

There is a strange duality and contradiction in Tughlaq which forms the basic absurdity of his character. He is at once an idealist and a shrewd politician, a humanist and a tyrant, a religious man and an atheist. In this complexity of character he is reminiscent of Camus' Caligula, the mad emperor who depopulates the world around him in his bid to push the absurdity of human life to its logical conclusion. It is the death of his beloved sister and betrothed Drusilla that arouses in the sensitive poet-emperor the sense of helplessness of the human being in the face of death. In an attempt to establish his freedom at the cost of that of all others, Caligula unleashes a reign of cruelty and terror. For Tughlaq, there is no single significant incident but a series of incidents which bring out the brutal madness in him. With his dream of a brave new world turned meaningless and futile by the factitiousness of the circumstances, the emperor reverts from contemplation to direct action, from idealistic hopes for his empire to shrewd political intrigues. A strange mingling of sincerity and cunning becomes evident in his treatment of his enemies—Imamuddin, Ain-ul-mulk and Shihabuddin. After planning the devout Imamuddin's death, Tughlaq calmly discourses with the religious leader on intricate religious problems. In the same gesture by which he has Imamuddin murdered, Tughlaq releases Ain-ul-mulk, his childhood friend-traitor, when the latter solves a riddle of chess. The base cruelty of his character is coupled with utmost subtlety. His killing of Shihabuddin has the same element of the grotesque. He suffers as he murders his most ardent follower yet immediately afterwards plans, with a remarkable calm, how to project this murder politically. In the moment of final confrontation with his step-mother he confides to her that all the murders he had committed, including that of his father, had been directed at establishing the ideal central to his existence. His belief in himself and his chosen act had made him remove every obstacle that came in his way.

I killed them—yes—but I killed them for an ideal. Don't I know the results ? ... No, they were not futile. They gave me what I wanted—power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognize myself. (p. 65)

We are reminded of Camus' Meursault who, though choosing to commit murder, moves towards a richer consciousness. Yet each killing deprives Tughlaq's character of some essential element. After he orders his step-mother's execution he tries to pray to the God he no longer believes in :

My skin drips with blood and I don't know how much of it is mine and how much of others. I started in Your path, Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now ? (p. 67)

Each murder enhances the latent madness in Tughlaq's character—authentic impulses are exhausted, the core of his being is twisted out of shape, his rich intellect becomes a mere tool in power-politics. When Aziz describes his experience with death : "One day, suddenly I had a revelation. This was all human life was worth, I said. This was the real meaning of the mystery of death—straw and skin." (p. 82) Tughlaq recognizes the wisdom of these words, for his experience too has brought him to a similar realization. With equal insight, he comprehends that the malaise which troubles him is he himself. When Barani urges him to leave his throne for the company of learned men, Tughlaq's anguish finds voice :

You want me to retire from my throne ? ... But it isn't that easy. It isn't as easy as leaving the patient in the wilderness because there's no cure for his disease. Don't you see— this patient racked by fever and crazed by the fear of enveloping vultures can't be separated from me ? ... How can I become wise again Barani ? (pp. 55-6)

Tughlaq begins as a devoutly religious man who orders regular prayers in his kingdom yet has the liberality of a humanist which allows him to treat his subjects as human beings irrespective of caste or creed. And when the formal tenets of religion stand in his way, he does not hesitate to remove them. His need of religion is to the extent that it helps to establish the identity he seeks for himself and his kingdom. He says to Imamuddin, the religious leader of his people :

I have never denied the word of God, Sheik sahib, because it's my bread and drink. I need it most when the surrounding void pushes itself into my soul and starts putting out every light burning there ... Yes, there is

dirt and smallness in my kingdom ... But why should I call on God to clean the dirt deposited by man ? No one can go far on his knees. I have a long way to go. Can't afford to crawl—I have to gallop. (p. 20)

When an attempt on his life is made during the time of worship by the most loyal Shihabuddin, Tughlaq abolishes prayer from his kingdom. His God, a personal one, is at once an accomplice and an adversary. After ordering his step-mother's death, he tries to pray and soon realizes the hypocrisy of seeking the help of a God he does not believe in, because his legs "Couldn't hold me up any longer." (p. 68) When at the close of the play he is forsaken by all, he asserts that he is not alone in his solitary madness :

Thank Heaven! For once I am not alone. I have a companion to share my madness now—the Omnipotent God! When you pass your final judgement on me, don't forget Him. (p. 85)

The existentialist hero envisions God as the height of all absurdity, partner of his own absurd adventures.

Not only in the portrayal of their protagonists but also in the exposition of their themes, the two plays deal with existentialist ideas. *Evam Indrajit* embodies the insignificance of middle-class existence, its petty needs and happinesses as a cyclic series adding up to nought. In its very structure, the play is in accordance with the idea to which the Writer refers when he describes his own play as being circular, having neither beginning, nor end. The absurd repetitiveness of the characters' lives is captured in an effective use of recurring snatches of meaningless dialogue, rhythmical utterance of numerals or through poignant poetry. All this is placed against the possibility of a rich and purposeful life which lives only in the dreams of Indrajit, the Writer and Manasi.

*Tughlaq* deals with basic existential ideas—man in relation to death, the individual's quest for the true identity of the self, his anguish at his alienation from the world in a wider perspective. The recurring use of disguise in the structure—Aziz masquerading as a Brahmin, Imamuddin forced into the disguise of Tughlaq, Aziz as Ghiasuddin—raises a crucial question of identity. When Tughlaq stands before the dead body of Imamuddin, whom he has himself dressed in his own image, he feels that it is his own corpse that is lying in front of him. Aziz's murder of Ghiasuddin and his replacement of the Khalif's descendant to secure his own ends form a parallel to Tughlaq's manipulation of Imamuddin as a political pawn. At the same time it gives completion to Aziz's career by relating it to his very first action in the play, obtaining compensation from the Sultan through the guise of a Brahmin. Just as Aziz stuffs dead bodies

with hay to earn money so he injects himself with another's identity or vice versa, all directed eventually to establishing his own. Karnad portrays Aziz as a counterpart of Tughlaq. Aziz is the successful individual, rightly adjusted to his degraded surroundings, who is able to turn the circumstances to his favour. His total comprehension and grotesque distortion of each of Tughlaq's actions exposes the inherent absurdity dividing the existentialist hero's aspirations and achievements. Aziz's character also throws light on Tughlaq's complete lack of contact with his people and time. Yet as individuals, the emperor and the *dhobi* attain the same wisdom : the triviality and insignificance of human life—an essential wisdom for conscious existence.

Both *Evam Indrajit* and *Tughlaq* have tried to relate existential issues to the Indian perspective. Sircar chooses the name of the mythical hero, Rāvaṇa's son, the adversary of the king of gods, for his protagonist. The existential question regarding man's aspirations despite his knowledge of imminent death is related to the wise crane's question to Yudhiṣṭhira and Yudhiṣṭhira's answer. On the other hand the existentialist concept of the pilgrimage without destiny is given the connotation of a "teerthayatra"<sup>12</sup>. Yet the existentialist concerns of the play remain diffused and fail to congeal as an authentic experience. The source and nature of Indrajit's torment and alienation remain rather vague. When Manasi asks Indrajit why he desires to fight the world and its rules, Indrajit cites a series of social injustice as the fountainhead of his anger. He also asserts that without that anger he would be no one. But Indrajit's personal revolt against specific instances of social injustice and his sympathy for human suffering do not have the depth or direction of the rebellion envisaged by Camus. In *The Rebel*, Camus sees human suffering as the basis for solidarity in any collective rebellion against injustice. Indrajit's goal remains equally obscure. His refusal to submit to the monotonous insignificance of his existence and his continual wanderings fail to attain any deeper significance. The projection of Sisyphus' cursed existence as a parallel to that of Indrajit's seems imposed. For Camus' Sisyphus, in the final analysis, is a happy man.<sup>13</sup> But Indrajit, as he is portrayed in the play, can hardly be called that. The play ends on a kind of apology for the continuation of a conformist's life on the part of the protagonist who is too sensitive or individualistic to choose any path of action.

*Tughlaq* exploits a prominent figure in Indian history to build its drama and at the same time tries to capture contemporaneity to give its existential orientation an Indian flavour. Karnad himself has referred to this contextual connection of his delineation of Tughlaq's regime with Nehru's rule in India.<sup>14</sup> For that matter, *Caligula* is often described as a portrayal of Hitler's regime.<sup>15</sup> Without going into the question of how successful *Tughlaq* is as a historical or a political play let us turn our attention to how related the existential problems it explores are to the Indian situation. The existential questions presented

mainly through Tughlaq's character remain part of the emperor's idiosyncrasy and fail to crystallize. When Camus dramatizes the history of the poet-emperor he focuses on Druscilla's death as the key incident behind Caligula's decision to cross swords with the absurdity of the world. But Tughlaq's existential adventures of the mind and the body lack any psychological background. He is an existential hero misplaced in history, alienated by a lack of understanding in the people around him. But how does that reflect the Indian experience? Tughlaq is obviously not a representative of the man-in-the-street, nor is he a middle-class individual.

It is interesting to note here that both playwrights, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad, have had a direct contact with the West. Sircar had actually written the first drafts of *Evam Indrajit* during his stay in London in the opening years of the sixties.<sup>16</sup> Karnad's first play *Yayati*, which re-interpreted the ancient myth in the existential context of responsibility, was written during his stay at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar.<sup>17</sup> *Tughlaq* was published a year after his return. In an interview he gave to the Natya Shodh Samsthan, Sircar confesses that his encounter with the West had opened his eyes to the tormenting insecurity that the two World Wars had left behind. And speaking of the influence of existentialist ideas on *Tughlaq*, Karnad says, "... because in the sixties existentialism was very popular ... All these questions were in the air and everyone was talking about them. Sartre, Camus, you know, the whole lot. So I started reading on Tughlaq ... And a good existentialist Tughlaq was also going to be an atheist."<sup>18</sup>

To understand why the existentialist ideas running through these plays fall short of an integrated world-view and fail to take root in the Indian experience, let us compare the socio-politico-economic background of the twentieth century existentialist movement in the West with the background which engendered them here. Against the backdrop of unprecedented violence and terror as manifested in the two World Wars, individual Western man found his life and values robbed of all significance. Human life acquired a totally arbitrary quality and was reduced to nothing more than a mere number. The economic depression in the inter-war period and the totalitarian governments which followed exposed "the amazing inadequacy of man, the ease with which he can be made to submit to the unnatural and the frightful, simply because as a rule he prizes the routine of ordinary existence above everything else"<sup>19</sup>. The totalitarian government along with war-time conditions and the inherent characteristics of a technologically-oriented industrial society compelled the individual to live a mass-existence. Man, diminished to a spoke in the giant wheel, his uniqueness flattened out by his circumstances, found himself alienated from the world, from his society, his fellow men and most of all from his own authentic being. Even God was dead and in the perspective of this stark reality,

riddled with contradictions, individual man was absolutely alone to act out his life within the time allotted him. Existential preoccupations of earlier philosophers like Kierkegaard or Nietzsche now appeared in a new light. Most of the twentieth century existentialists, philosopher or litterateur, were directly involved with contemporary events and their 'Weltanschauung' evolved out of the general experience and consciousness of modern Western man.

One is struck by a wide divergence in experience when one turns to the Indian context. In spite of the uncertainties and frustration of the immediate post-Independence period, the general atmosphere of the fifties and the early sixties was one of elation and expansion. Emerging from a series of historical and ideological crises, India was then dreaming of a fruitful future. The nation was flooded with waves of new enthusiasm, a zeal to work and a promise of reconstruction. Under the prevailing circumstances the urban middle-class was propelled to the vanguard of intellectual and ideological leadership. Art, literature, theatre and in general the cultural life of the era reflected the interests of this class. Apart from its interest in the analysis of contemporary social, political and economic situation, what came up as a major concern in the literature of this time was the complexity of the individual's relationship to society. This preoccupation with the individual pitted against the immediate environment was bound to give rise to certain existential interests. But a more probable reason for these interests could have been an exposure on the part of the middle-class intellectual to post-World War European literature and thought.

The Indian intellectual's preoccupation with existentialism could not be as deep-rooted as that of his twentieth century European counterpart's. The Indian did not have a first-hand experience of the World Wars, of the totalitarian regimes, the concentration camps or the horror of the atom bomb. For him death did not loom sky-high over the single life possessed by man, nor were the human individual's aspirations and ventures reduced to a ridiculous absurdity in the face of the adversity of the times. The Indian litterateur dabbling in existential issues did not have a metaphysical construct to base his work upon. Neither did he have a national ethos from which this world-view spontaneously issued forth. The twentieth century European existentialist, be he a philosopher or a litterateur, was not concerned with any arm-chair problem of choice and action but with the nightmarish situation created during the times of crisis when immediate decisions involving issues of life and death had to be taken. Whereas for the twentieth century European the degradation of human life and values with related anxieties gave rise to the sense of the absurdity of life, for the Indian middle-class intellectual of the post-Independence period, the feeling of absurdity sprang from a monotonous and repetitive existence. For this reason, perhaps, the existentialist ideas explored in the two plays, *Evam Indrajit* and

*Tughlaq*, lack necessary profundity to integrate them into a consistent outlook and remain unrooted in the larger context of the Indian situation.

#### NOTES

1. Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Joseph Laredo (1982 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1985), p. 118.
2. John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1973 ; rpt. 1976), p. 82.
3. Badal Sircar, *Evam Indrajit*, trans. Girish Karnad (Calcutta : Oxford University Press, 1974 ; rpt. 1979), p. 14. All subsequent reference is to this edition.
4. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1975 ; rpt. 1977), p. 75.
5. Ibid., p. 64.
6. Ibid., pp. 108-9.
7. Ibid., p. 109.
8. Ibid., p. 111.
9. Ibid., p. 83.
10. Girish Karnad, *Tughlaq*, trans. Author (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1972 ; rpt. 1986), p. 38. All subsequent reference is to this edition.
11. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1957), p. 95.
12. Badal Sircar, *Evam Indrajit* (Calcutta : S. Entool & Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1969), p. 100.
13. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 75.
14. Karnad said this in an interview taken at Dharward on 17 February 1982, by a Calcutta-based theatre institution, Natya Shodh Samsthan.
15. John Cruickshank, "Introduction" to Albert Camus, *Caligula and other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (1948 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, rpt. 1984), p. 21.
16. Sircar said this in an interview to Natya Shodh. This interview was taken in Calcutta on 22 March 1982.
17. Karnad stated this in his Natya Shodh interview.
18. Ibid.
19. Albert Camus quoted in Margaret Chatterjee, *The Existentialist Outlook* (New Delhi : Orient Longman, 1973), p. 6.



# THE GENERIC LOCATION OF WOMEN'S TESTIMONIAL WRITING AND ITS SOCIAL FUNCTION IN INDIA AND LATIN AMERICA

*Kavita Panjabi*

In the last three decades the testimonio has emerged as one of the most important literary sites for the generation of women's collective and oppositional consciousness in India and Latin America. Through the political practice of recording historical memory and eye-witness accounts, testimonios foreground a critique of oppressive state rule. And from the point of view of literary study, the crystallization of the testimonio as a narrative genre in the zone of indeterminacy between the novel, historiography and autobiography reveals the inadequacy of existing genres in representing popular struggles in hegemonic and authoritarian states in these regions.

The literary situations within which testimonial literature is situated in Latin America and India are radically different. In Latin America, with the publication of a large number of testimonios and their legitimation as a literary genre by Cuba's cultural centre, the Casa de las Americas, in 1970, the testimonio has come to stay. *Sandino's Daughters* about women revolutionaries in Nicaragua, *I Rigoberta Menchú*, which incidentally gained this young Guatemalan woman international recognition long before she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and *Let me Speak ! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*, are just some of the pioneering examples of testimonios from Latin America. In the Indian sub-continent, however, this genre is still in the nascent stage and has yet to gain recognition as a distinct genre. However, the presence of important testimonios narrating women's experiences of political struggle in the last two and a half decades testifies to the growing significance of this genre in the sub-continent too. *We Were Making History : Women and the Telengana Uprising* is a collection of testimonies of women who participated in the Telengana People's Struggle of the forties in the state of Hyderabad, recorded and published by the Stree Shakti Sangathan ; Jaya Mitra's and Meenakshi Sen's, entitled *Hanyaman and Jailer Bhetor Jail* respectively, are both prison testimonios of the Naxalite period ; and Akhtar Baluch's "Sister, are you still here ?" is the diary of a Sindhi woman prisoner, arrested for having protested against the detention of Sindhi nationalist and peasant leaders in Pakistan in 1970, during the interim regime of General Yahya Khan.

One of the first cases (perhaps the first case) of Latin American influence on Indian literature in the context of women's writing is that of *Sandino's*

*Daughters* and *Let Me Speak! on We Were Making History*. The editors of the testimonios acknowledge this influence thus :

When we first chose to do this study, one of our own aims was to recover our own history (we saw the women in the Telengana Struggle as founders of a history of women's action in Andhra, indeed in India itself. So we thought we would be tracing a lineage ... But after we had done nearly forty interviews, we decided that it would be best to publish them as life stories. We now thought of it as a book that was theirs, as much as it was ours. We were also encouraged because we had read and enjoyed *Let me Speak* and *Sandino's Daughters*. (280)

This instance reflects the direct influence of Central American women's testimonios on Indian feminist historiography as a precedent and persuasive force, encouraging the creation of space for a new and important genre, the testimonio. What is also important is that there was ready ground here for the reception of this influence, given the strong parallels in the political and historical experiences of women in these cases, as all three works are situated in the historical context of crises in nationalism in contemporary postcolonial societies, and the increasing articulation of the role of women in these struggles.

*We Were Making History* comes from the perspective of reclaiming women's history as a political intervention :

Women's history, then, is an intervention : its intent is more political than archival ... As we search out and record the histories in this book, we set out to reclaim a past and celebrate a lineage of resistance and growth, for to be deprived of a past is to inherit an impoverished present and a future sealed off from change. (19)

This emphasis on testimony as intervention is seen as one of the chief characteristics of the Central and Latin American women's testimonios too. In fact the Stree Shakti Sangathana's view that the testimonies are a record of historical codifications of strategies of resistance strongly parallels Domitila Barrio's argument for the necessity of testimonies recording historical struggles as counsel for succeeding generations. (40)

The testimonio thus reinforces the importance and power of literature itself as a form of social action. As Beverley and Zimmerman suggest,

If the novel and the short story are closed and private narrative forms in the sense that both the story and the subject end with the end of the text, defining that autoreferential self-sufficiency that is the basis of formalist

reading practices, in testimonio the distinction between public and private spheres of life has been transgressed. The narrator in the testimonio is a real person who continues living and acting in a real social history that also continues. (178)

This observation is clearly based on a sweeping generalization, and it might be more accurate to limit the claim about closed and private narrative forms to the realist/naturalist novel or short story. But the thrust of Beverley and Zimmerman's argument, about the testimonio mediating the private and the public through the function of the narrator who is also a political activist, is still valuable in the distinction it makes between the testimonio and other literary genres.

It is also imperative to stress here that though *We Were Making History* started out as a historical project, it turned into a collection of testimonios, and the reason is given by the editors as follows :

Constantly with us was the feeling that this was all out of our own lives—that we had been there before ourselves. We matched incidents in their lives with those in ours : oh she's like you or X or Y we'd comment. Gradually these stories became a part of our own mythology. It was only as we struggled through this editing that we realized that an analysis could follow at any time but that their voices had to be heard. (281)

Hence the testimonio is not seen as a substitute for historiography, but as a work occupying a space distinct from the latter in terms of establishing a collective identity and consciousness, in terms of foregrounding voices that have to be heard, in a genre yet unnamed in India.

The social function of the testimonio has given rise to various debates about the testimonio as an extra-literary or anti-literary as opposed to the literary form of discourse. The problem is that most of these studies, comparing the testimonio to a predominant Western notion of autobiography in their effort to establish generic and disciplinary boundaries, try to establish the testimonial mode as a break from autobiography. My intention in this essay is to challenge this assertion of discontinuity and point out a basic continuity in the development of the testimonial genre from the autobiographical mode in the Latin American and Indian contexts. The thrust of my argument in the rest of this paper is that the testimonio did not develop from a vacuum, it belongs to and is a development from traditions of political literary texts that prevailed in both the Indian and the Latin American contexts.

One of the most influential studies about the relationship of the testimonio to autobiography has been Doris Sommer's "Not Just a Personal Story :

Women's Testimonios and the Plural Self". Sommer distinguishes between the two on grounds of rhetoric, locating the testimonio within a general discourse of metonymy that challenges the hegemonic language of metaphoric substitution that she associates with autobiography. She theorizes about the testimonio's narrator saying that

... her singularity achieves its identity as an extension of the collective. The singular represents the plural not because it replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole. In rhetorical terms, ... there is a fundamental difference here between the metaphor of autobiography and heroic narrative in general, which assumes an identity by substituting one (superior) signifier for another (I for we, leader for follower, Christ for the faithful), and metonymy, a lateral identification through relationship, which acknowledges the possible differences, among "us" as components of the whole. (108)

While Sommer is absolutely right in asserting that the testimonio functions through the rhetoric of metonymy, her claim about metaphoric substitution in the case of autobiography is questionable in India and Latin America, and one can in fact detect distinct connections between the autobiography and the testimonio in these contexts.

There is definitely enough evidence available to establish that there were strains of autobiographical writing in India, especially women's autobiographies, that did not subscribe to the theory of either the individualist or the hegemonic discourse of autobiography. The first known autobiography of a Bengali woman, *Amar Jiban*, hardly assumes the rhetoric of metaphor, substituting a "superior" signifier for another, that is the "I" for a "we". In fact the text is marked by a distinct lack of a sense of self worth, and the focus is more on privileging religion rather than the self.

In her study of five nineteenth-century Bengali women's autobiographies, Meenakshi Mukherjee too asserts that these five texts, variously described as diaries or journals or memoirs, cannot all be categorized as autobiography in the sense generally accepted in the West, because an autobiography is supposed to affirm identity (268-9). Of Manoda Debi's *Janaika Grihabadhur Diary* (The Diary of a Housewife) she says, "It is more the chronicle of a family, than an autobiography written in order to give her personal experience coherence and form" (266), and of Saradasundari Debi's *Atmakatha* (An Autobiography) she writes: "It is entirely an other-oriented life, seen in terms of her relationship with others. ... Saradasundari Debi, in spite of her exposure to so much of the outside world, sees her happiness and grief only in terms of her extended family" (256-7). Thus in most of these autobiographies, the woman's identity

is achieved as an extension of the collective. And though it is true that this is the result of leading lives largely confined to the joint family or the extended family in the nineteenth century, and that the autobiography in the Indian sub-continent has developed a stronger focus on the individual in the twentieth century, this very collective experience shapes Jaya Mitra's prison testimonio *Hanyaman*, showing clear connections between the tropes that define the image of the self in these autobiographies (ma, mashi, bhabhi, didi and beti) and the tropes of solidarity in prison.

In the context of autobiography in India in the twentieth century, Gusdorf, in his extremely influential but limited essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", claims that autobiography, associated with the focus on "the singularity of each individual life",

... expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing mentality that was not their own. When Gandhi tells his own story, he is using Western means to defend the East. (29)

One wonders if Gusdorf ever looked at Gandhi's autobiography before making this statement claiming that people like Gandhi were "annexed by an intellectual colonizing mentality that was not their own". In fact on the very first page of his introduction to his autobiography Gandhi clearly designates his project as distinct from that of a traditional Western autobiography. Before he starts writing, he says,

... a God-fearing friend had his doubts, which he shared with me on my day of silence. "What has set you on this adventure?" he asked. "Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East who has written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence ..."

This argument had some effect on me. But it is not my purpose to attempt a *real* autobiography (emphasis added). I simply want to tell the story of my experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. (3-4)

In selecting this long quotation I don't intend to endorse any kind of easy or judgemental separation of what is 'Western' or 'Eastern', but the point is that Gandhi was writing in the context of the Indian nationalist struggle for independence from British rule, and part of his project included defining an

Indian identity as opposed to one that conformed to the gaze of the Other, that is, the 'West'. Hence the stress on distinguishing his autobiography, which focuses on the moral lessons of his experiments, from a "real" autobiography with its privileging of the individual. In fact it was, in the ultimate instance, an elaboration of his moral and political philosophy, a move to prepare his country's people for political action, and the product of a resistant rather than a colonized consciousness.

Gandhi also says :

I believe, or at any rate flatter myself with the belief that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the reader. ... I should certainly like to narrate experiments in the spiritual field which are known only to myself and from which I have derived such power as I possess for working in the political field. If the experiments are really spiritual, then there can be no room for self praise. (3-4)

Thus, the crucial point is that Gandhi's autobiography, not unlike the testimonio, was an attempt to engender a political consciousness amongst his people and to share his empowering understanding of spirituality and politics without taking up the hegemonic stance of an autobiography.

In the Latin American context too, though there is a distinct preoccupation with the self, the autobiographical genre establishes a political tradition that the testimonio has developed in relation to, rather than in reaction against. Sylvia Molloy, in her landmark study of nineteenth and twentieth century Latin American autobiographies, including those of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Victoria Ocampo and Jose Vasconcelos, asserts that

While not denying the preoccupation with self at work in these texts, I contend that their primary concern is not autobiographical—even if the latter may be one of their unwitting achievements ... (3)

and that

A strong testimonial stance informs the autobiographical writing in Spanish America. If not always perceiving themselves as historians ... autobiographers will continue to see themselves as witnesses. The fact that this testimony is often endowed with the aura of terminal visions—the autobiographer bearing witness to that which is no more—not only aggrandizes the authors's individual persona, but reflects the communal (community) dimension sought for the autobiographical venture. (8-9)

She further foregrounds the cultural hegemony involved in the established

definition of autobiography and, creating a space for various types of autobiography, distinguishes the Latin American examples on grounds of the combination of the personal and the communal :

While on the one hand this combination of the personal and the communal restricts the scrutiny of self so frequently associated with the autobiography (a view, one should not forget, that applies to just one type of autobiography), on the other, it has the advantage of capturing a tension between self and other, of generating a reflection on the fluctuating places of the subject within its community, of allowing for other voices, besides that of the "I," to be heard in the text. (9)

Thus, in the Latin American context too one sees a continuity in terms of both rhetoric and political content between the autobiography and the testimonio.

Sommer's observations about the testimonio then need to be revised in new light. She claims that

It ( the testimonio) is the translation of a hegemonic autobiographical prose into a colonized language that does not equate identity with individuality. It is thus a reminder that life continues at the margins of Western discourse, and continues to disturb and challenge it. (111)

Her statement is extremely problematic because, in the first instance, as I have already argued in the case of *Hanyaman*, it is not always the translation of a "hegemonic" autobiographical prose, and neither is it a colonized language. In fact it is the language of peoples who started on their decolonizing ventures with the earlier genre of autobiography itself, and who proceeded to develop the rhetoric of autobiography into one of the testimonio to critique the hegemonic or authoritarian powers of their postcolonial nation states. Thus it is not with the testimonio that "life continues ... to disturb and challenge" Western discourse ; it is a process that started with moves towards cultural decolonization and the construction of national identity, as was the case with Gandhi, Sarmiento and Vasconcelos, and continues in the contemporary form of the testimonio. The difference is that earlier the autobiography challenged colonial and imperial domination together with Western discourse, now the testimonio challenges national versions of history and democracy.

Moreover, while one appreciates Sommer's efforts to chalk out an independent ground for the testimonio, the crucial point is that if the testimonio challenges Western discourse, it does so only incidentally ; and this is of more importance to metropolitan critics in search of postcolonial texts than to the postcolonial narrator, who is more concerned with rupturing the more imme-

diate repressive national hegemonic discourses than with challenging Western discourses. The continued evaluation of postcolonial literary production in relation to Western discourses, and as situated at the margins of Western culture, rather than in terms of their own historical realities ensures a continuation of cultural appropriation, and an intensification of the same metropolitan blind-spots that contemporary Western theory has made it a profession to critique.

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- 1. ABELARDIAN SEMIOTICS AND OTHER ESSAYS**
  - 2. THE SEMIOTICS OF CREATIVE PROCESS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FRANCE**
  - 3. STRUCTURES OF NARRATIVE IN EAST AND WEST**
- (New Delhi : Bahri Publications, 1989)

*by*

**HARJEET SINGH GILL**

The texts mentioned above are the products of Professor Gill's long engagement with the twelfth century French philosopher Pierre Abelard, renamed "l'oubli de la France", by way of research, teaching and writing. Professor Gill reads Abelard as a contemporary, in the light of modern semiotics throwing open a vast range of issues with immediate validity, and at the same time he retraces the definition of the sign in his works, reading him as one of the originating sources of the philosophy of language who brings a third synthesizing term to the dialectic between Platonic Universalism and Aristotelian Nominalism. The core of each of the three texts is formed by the Abelardian discourse and so one comes across a central chapter in slightly different form in all the texts. Abelard draws on the existing theory of the three degrees of knowledge—sensation, imagination and intellection—and shows that it is through these stages that the word is apprehended. It follows then that the correlation between 'word' and 'thing', 'signifiant' and 'signifié', is a matter of intellection and there is a clear distinction between the mode of existence and the mode of conceptualization. The sound or the utterance of the word is of the "order of nature" while the signifié is created by the addition of something else, which is produced by the particular social state. The first can be individual and isolated and have a physical identity while the latter is based on correlative analogies and "abstracted parameters". Also in the constitution of language there has to be thinking beings who reflect upon the nature of things and exchange their intellection or analyses. In the process the word will take in several intellections and hence the possibility of multiple significations. Professor Gill stresses at this point that the multiplicity of reference is the crux of the problem of signification and this is not sufficiently emphasized in modern semiotics. It may also be important to remember Volosinov at this point who had stated that the forms of sign are conditioned by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction.<sup>1</sup> Without falling into determinism this observation may lead to very different areas of engagement. But to go back to Abelard, the third important point in his discourse pointed out by Professor Gill is that the relationship

between different objects is established metaphorically in terms of other objects or by a correlation of the conceptual elements of signification and metonymically, that is by their sequential correlation. In trying to concretize his notion Abelard applies it to the concept of the Trinity and comes to the conclusion that an object conceived metaphorically bypasses time and space or metonymic relationship. With the metaphoric relationship achieved, he says, the metonymic is lost. Professor Gill extends this notion to various spheres of man's activity showing him to be capable of being at liberty in the midst of determining forces. That the very signification of his being is contained in the working out of this liberty is a running motif in many of the chapters of his text.

In *Abelardian Semiotics and Other Essays* Professor Gill uses the framework of Abelardian theory to analyse various cultural phenomena—the creative process in literary discourse where discourse is seen to be a synchronic structure of simple and frozen signifiers interacting dialectically with one another ; "The Myth of the Great Professor and the Good Student" where he gives the 'folklore' history of the French University system and traces the '68 movement to extreme centralization and the institution of the Cours Magistral with no communication between the teacher and the taught ; Sartre's existential method and its bearings on biography and the conflicts of the period. In this context professor Gill also looks at Sartre's reading of Flaubert in *L'Idiot de la famille* and going through the intricacies of the femininity of Flaubert and the masculinity of Emma arrives at the teasing conclusion that in *Madame Bovary* Flaubert secretly avenges his class, his "bad faith", his "non-relations". "He gave to the people what they thought they liked and within the internal structuration, he metamorphosed realism into absolute irreality." The femininity of Flaubert or the masculinity of Emma need not necessarily mean that the man-woman being had lost its identity in the milieu it flourished in thereby playing a game of illusions with the components of realism. There could be more positive readings to the text which is shown in the light of negation because of the rupture of the artist with his class. The issue is perhaps larger and may be worked out in terms of relations of production, of desire having no base and the logic of 'Néant' emerging from the centre of the hollowness that follows.

The next chapter in the text is on Althusser who advances the notion of the Marxist approach which he thinks is opposed to the analytico-telological approach and which may be worked out within a certain structural framework of modern semiotics. The development of the Marxian discourse, his beginning within a contingency of ideology, the complex network of relationship with the given contingency that follows and the gradual moving away from it that evolves from Althusser's approach is highlighted as exemplary of all "constituting ideological structures which arrive at establishing independent concep-

tual totalities". In the chapters that follow we have the semiotics of myths studied with reference to the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss whose works according to Professor Gill may be seen as historiography par excellence as it aims at reintegrating man in his nature ; the application of a linguistic model by Lacan in the study of the individual subject's relationship with knowledge ; Foucault's distinction of "the history of ideas" and the "archaeology of knowledge"; and with the form, content and praxis of our communication system. As one goes through these sections one encounters new insights into familiar scholastic terrains but at the same time one wishes the analysis had been more prolonged in each case and more elaborate on the implications of the findings.

*The Semiotics of Creative Process in Eighteenth Century France* looks at Destutt de Tracy's *Eléments d'Idéologie* in the first section. The text appears at the end of the eighteenth century in the tradition of Condillac where the different stages of human perception leading from the sign to the idea through sensation, memories and correlations are worked out. In the course of the text Professor Gill points out the chief difference between the school of Condillac and that of Descartes. It lies in the fact that the former looks at the origin or the generation of things to understand its nature or arrive at its properties whereas in the latter things are defined to arrive at properties for they believed in the principle of innate ideas. In the former the interaction between signs and ideas at each stage is studied to arrive at an understanding of the structuration of the linguistic discourse. The implication of such an interaction is that our language and our knowledge move together. But there is the danger of moving into zones of the politics of power when the thesis is taken further to the proposition that "a relatively more perfect language is used by more enlightened people". It has often been said that a philosophy of language presupposes a philosophy of history and eighteenth century codes are well evident in the analyses offered in the second half of the text. The author takes cognizance of the issue and in the last section deals with the role of intellectual nationalism in eighteenth century language philosophies.

Apart from the importance of the text to students of linguistics and specially of the French school—the latter has to be stressed for not only this but all three texts are distinctly French in idiom, in syntax and sometimes in spellings betraying a French formation which is a source of strength but which may also pose communicational difficulties—its contribution lies in underlining certain issues in the philosophy of knowledge and in the domain of semiotics. The prime metaphor in the philosophy of knowledge for many a school has been one of difference or distance, between the sign and the things, representation and reality. Starting from this premise we also see a prerogative for relational studies, a 'journey towards rapprochement'. A large segment of

the text deals with propositions and syntactic constituents, the role of each component isolatedly and in relation to each other in the development of ideas or in ideology (science of ideas). In order to understand the process of signification two supposedly unrelated spheres, that of metaphysics and grammar, one studying the relation of ideas with things and the other studying words in as much as they are used to express thoughts, are brought closer. As the author states, metaphysics now has to take into consideration the role played by language in the formation of ideas and grammar to go into the relations it has with the ideas because words are signs of ideas. The point made here is also that the sign cannot be understood by its own existence alone. "It is only when an element enters into a relation with another element that it receives the status of a sign." As this line of thought is developed semiotics or the science of signs also receives a definite connotation. Speaking from within the syntactical preoccupations of the eighteenth century Professor Gill states, "The field of knowledge where questions such as what is thinking ? what is language ? how can knowledge be generated with the help of words and phrases etc. are addressed and their operational mechanism is called semiotics." What we have in this definition is basic recognition that at the core of the semiotic object "is a specifically semiotic system which is language"<sup>2</sup>. It is further elaborated in the definition where it is a reflection on knowledge taking into account its relationship with language. Elsewhere in the text the author speaks of semiotics as "an autonomous discipline of investigation". We know that the author is not really referring to a set of methods, but implied in it is definitely the idea of a theory of research and not merely the idea of reflections upon knowledge. The problem may lie with the very concept of semiotic analysis in general. As has been stated, one of the main problems of semiotics lies in the epistemological contrast between "extremely specific data and extremely abstract and general hypothesis, inserted in a (philosophical) system, explicit (Pierce) or not."<sup>3</sup> There can be the semiotics of a very concrete analysable phenomenon on the one hand, and on the other semiotics of cultural activities or aesthetics, such as semiotics of the creative process. Semiotics has also been divided by Morris into "pure", "descriptive" and "applied" categories. But there too the distinctions overlap in any pragmatic consideration. In Professor Gill's account the history of semiotics is Piercean in its occupation with pure grammar and rhetoric and also pre-Piercean as it is found in the decoding of Abelardian philosophy. The field in which he works is vast and amorphous but there is a constant return to the semiotic object which is as mentioned earlier, language. There is also often a preoccupation with semiotics itself, a metasemiotics as it were, but that again may be inevitable given the fluid state of the concept or discipline as it may be understood.

In *Structures of Narrative in East and West* Professor Gill looks into the

semiotics of narrative. Starting from Abeldardian premises his focus is on a level where nothing is understood literally or as it stands in a metonymic progression of events, but where everything is submitted to an imaginative and intellective reconstruction transforming words, gestures and events to highly charged semiotic signs. From this he goes on to make a detailed sequential analysis of Flaubert's *Saint Julien*, Qadiryar's *Puran Bhagat* and Waris Shah's *Heer Ranjha*. The French structural school is evident in the analysis but other dimensions are added to his work with its strong emphasis on codes of cultural archetypes or anthropology. At first the text is divided into sequences where the discourse is revealed in a specific progression. The sequences are further divided into sub- and microensembles which are analysed as propositions and ideograms in the form of prefixes, suffixes and infixes. The syntactic order of the narrative is the semiotic order from the reader's point of view, while a second order where the reader has to correlate signifiers and reconstitute links across the linear sequences is the semiologic order. It may be recalled at this point that the terminological ambiguity between semiotic and semiology had never really been satisfactorily resolved in the Western tradition. Saussure's semiotics could be Barthes's semiology which could again be Kristeva's semiotics and so on. Nomenclatures are not really very important here, what is the working model and that the author differentiate between the two levels in a very consistent manner. There is also a third level which is that of mediation, the transformation brought to the stained-glass window version of the Julien story seen by Flaubert at Rouen. A typological comparison is then made with the legend of Puran Bhagat and as the author states "this section deals with an historical progression in the creative process and also penetrates into the cosmological conceptualization across time and space and across cultures, achieving indirectly a *certain universality of the Becoming of the Being*." The dimensions are over-extensive, speaking again of a tradition of scholarship which is distinctly French. But then extensions are preferable to constrictions evident in different areas of scholarship and imposed by invisible institutions of power. The human concern is also extensive, preoccupied with the vast contours of the human condition on the one hand, and implicitly with smaller social configurations on the other. What is a little puzzling to this reader is that the author, a scholar with such human substance, should define the human condition in terms of violence. "The human condition, the subject of every literary discourse, is the condition of violence, man constantly being 'violé', raped in every socio-political individual situation." True he reacts and does not merely submit to "the catastrophic avalanche of history", or even to the gods, but the reaction is so violent in the case of Julien, of Puran Bhagat, of Oedipus that it seems to tear apart the very human fabric. But then again the author has the last word. It is important, he feels, not to stop with *Oedipus Rex* but to go

on to Oedipus at Colonus. The protagonists he looks at "follow different manifest traditions, different overt psychic paths, but after a series of destabilizations, all these three achieve a certain existential equilibrium whose conceptual correspondence acquires a centrifugal precision which cannot be altered either by gods or by men. They seem to have located the Centre from where they are now able to move both Earth and Heaven, and, gods give in."

The texts in themselves are excellent examples of what linguistic discourse can achieve in the realm of the social sciences. And as for semiotic studies, the texts prove a dictum made famous by Morris that the sign is the main agency in the development of individual freedom. Only the author would go back to Abelard to substantiate the statement.

*Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta*

#### NOTES

1. V.N.Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. L. Matejka and I.R.Titunik (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1986).
2. Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Semiotics* (Berlin : Mouton de Gruyère & Co., 1986), p. 893.
3. Ibid., p. 897.

# LA LITTÉRATURE COMPARÉE

( Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1989)

by

**YVES CHEVREL**

**QUEST FOR A METHOD**

While I would agree with Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington) that the maturity of a discipline is commensurate with its readiness to assess itself<sup>1</sup>, I would like to add that the task, however tempting and attractive, is by no means easy. Stumbling blocks are many and varied, ranging from René Etiemble's "Comparaison n'est pas raison"<sup>2</sup> to Haskell M. Block's "dans la définition de la littérature comparée il faut plutôt souligner la disposition d'esprit du comparatiste que la matière de ses recherches ou les cloisonnements universitaires."<sup>3</sup> (In the definition of Comparative Literature it is much more necessary to underline the mental disposition of the comparatist than the materials of his researches or academic compartmentalizations.) The danger inherent in both the positions is that of speculative abstractions. M. Yves Chevrel's *La littérature comparée* takes care of such problems by starting with a set of definitions. While the first part of the introductory chapter is given to clarifying certain fallacious notions about the discipline by suggesting *what it is not*, the second part seeks to suggest *what it is*. The expression 'littérature comparée' is not to be confused with an ensemble of literatures, nor should it be reduced to literary comparisons and not at all to a study of parallels. The term, according to the author, comes nearest to what in German academic terminology is known as 'Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft', a comparative science of literature. What is implied is that it is a procedure, an exploration of a gamut of hypotheses, a mode of interrogating texts. The distinctive and distinguishing feature of the discipline is its decision to raise a fundamental question : what happens when a human consciousness, integrated in a specific culture, confronts a text which is grounded in a different cultural ethos ? This confrontation with *the other* is at the centre of the comparatist approach.

The manual, accordingly, is a fusion of two modes—one that emphasizes modalities (reception, influence, imitation, parallel, analogy) and technique (comparison) ; and another that stresses subject-matter. While the thrust of the text is clearly historiographic the structuring is indicative of a careful, deductive analysis of the problematic that is comparative literature. The manual proceeds from a systematic survey of definitions to the notion of 'l'oeuvre étrangère' through 'enjeux d'une historiographie littéraire comparatiste' to 'mythes littéraires', 'formes artistiques' and concludes with an interrogating chapter on comparative poetics and a brief survey of the future of the discipline.

What is particularly striking about the method is the author's frequent transitions from exposition to interrogation : vers une poétique comparatiste ? une approche comparatiste de la notion de 'texte' ? une poétique de l'escape ? vers un art total ? The interrogatory mode is clearly an invitation to a dialogue. The author, it is obvious, is more inclined to reconciling conflicting views than aggravating differences by imposing paradigms. In a way, the approach is also a comment on comparatism as a developing multidimensional discipline. In fact, in M. Chevrel's thesis, there is an explicit recognition of the yet unidentified spaces within the field :

La littérature comparée a de grands projets et ceux qui la pratiquent reconnaissent, voire soulignent, qu'elle est à la fois indispensable et utopique ...<sup>4</sup> (Comparative literature has some great projects and those who practise it recognize, rather, emphasize that it is at one and the same time indispensable and utopian ...)

He cites from an article of Weisstein's<sup>5</sup> to strengthen this point :

D'où venons-nous ? Que sommes-nous ? Où allons-nous ?

Is it this awareness of a 'permanent crisis' that explains the conspicuous absence of certain problematic zones within the arena of writing ? A case in point is the manual's reticence about 'écriture féminine' as a possible research area for comparatists. The entire movement is encapsulated in two statements made by A. Nin (in a note dated September 1976), first in connection with erotic literature :

Pendant des siècles nous, n'avions eu qu'un seul modèle pour ce genre littéraire—celui des hommes ... (For centuries we had only one model for this genre—the male one ...)

and second, about her own contribution to the field :

(ils) représentent les efforts premiers d'une femme pour parler d'un domaine qui avait été jusqu'alors réservés aux hommes. (They (the works) represent the initial efforts of a woman to talk about a domain which had been, till the present day, reserved for men.)<sup>6</sup>

The discussion on 'écriture féminine' could have been more elaborate, even within the French school. While there is a passing reference to S. de Beauvoir, the names that are absent are Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Marguerite



Duras, to mention only a few. Besides, since he poses the most valuable question regarding women's writing, "y a-t-il une façon spécifiquement féminine d'écrire", a reasonably brief introduction should have been given to the analysis of womanhood in Western theoretical discourse.

Yet another absent space in the manual is Africa and Latin America in their literary dimensions. The absence is striking because M. Chevrel does discuss anglophonie, francophonie, hispanophonie and lusophonie as potential areas for comparatist researches. One cannot resist quoting an observation made by Jacques Chevrier :

Une fois de plus, il faut bien le reconnaître, l'Afrique demeure la grande absente dans la série des manuals qui, depuis un demi-siècle, ont tenté de saisir et de définir l'objet "Littérature comparée". (Once more it is necessary to acknowledge, Africa remains the great absent factor in the series of manuals which, for over half a century, have tried to grapple with and define the object comparative literature.)<sup>7</sup>

M. Chevrier's attack is directed against a discernible formula to be found in all the manuals of the French school written since the fifties. To quote Chevrier once again,

... mais que dire du petit "Que sais-je?" de Marius-François Guyard, plusieurs fois réédité dans les années 50-60, c'est-à-dire au moment même où s'amorce le mouvement de décolonisation outre-mer ...? Même constat de carence pour le livre de Claude Pichois et André-Marie Rousseau remarquable à bien des égards, mais également muet sur l'Afrique, tout comme sa réédition dans la formule augmentée et remise à jour par Pierre Brunel sous le titre *Qu'est-ce que la littérature comparée ?* (... But what is to be said about the small *Que sais-je ?* of Marius-François Guyard which has been re-edited several times between '50 and '60, that is, at the very moment when the overseas decolonization movement begins ...? The book by Claude Pichois and André-Marie Rousseau, otherwise remarkable in quite a few respects, suffers from the same drawback. It is equally silent about Africa, as silent as its re-edited and enlarged up-to-date version by Pierre Brunel under the title *Qu'est-ce que la littérature comparée ?* )

M. Chevrier's polemic draws the reader's attention to a similar silence in M. Chevrel's work. Can the lacuna be explained away by the recentness of the 'African' phenomenon? Should one also interpret the absence of Latin America along the same lines ?

No less controversial perhaps is the categorical division of the literary phenomenon into 'occidental' and 'oriental'. With the fast changing politico-cultural scenario in view, such polarizations do not sound very convincing. Surely it is time one took notice of the 'literature of exiles'?

However, the intrinsic value of M. Chevrel's text is in its desire to evolve a methodology that might make the discipline something more concrete than a mere 'attitude' or 'disposition d'un esprit'. The triad he formulates consists of the following pronouncements:

- A) Comparative literature is a discipline of transversal vocation. Distinct from those disciplines that propose to explore spaces entirely defined, comparative literature proceeds more by intersections of different linguistic areas, literature and arts as well as literature and history.
- B) Comparative literature encourages the dynamics of analysis—synthesis—analysis. Certainly, this is not to suggest that this is a unique feature of this discipline alone (it is at the base of a number of intellectual operations). But, without a doubt, for a comparatist it is a categorical imperative. The principal objective of his research is a provisional synthesis of an ensemble of facts that belonged, at the start, to two different spaces. But, a return to one of them is always a part of the operation as much as the movement outward, to look for other possible areas. The constitution of a totality always remains problematic.
- C) Comparative literature posits problems regarding systems of reference. Comparatism presupposes an aptitude to look for certain referential modes that help in classifying works in terms of specific perspectives. It is necessary to objectify and therefore justify these referential modes.

The emphasis in M. Chevrel's proposed methodology on 'Reception' as an integral part of the critical machinery is a significant contribution to the tradition of comparative literature manuals. The term does not make its entry into the French academic vocabulary before the seventies and is institutionally recognized as late as 1983 in *La recherche en littérature générale et comparée en France* which contains a significant chapter "De l'influence à la réception critique". The recognition of the actualizing potential of the recipient or a community of recipients within a given cultural system is relevant not only to the methodology of comparative literature but to all literary and cultural studies of our times. The author puts his accent on the key concept "horizon of expectations" given currency by H.R. Jauss of Konstanz fame in the following way:

Un second concept essentiel est celui d'horizon d'attente (*Erwartungshorizont*) qui intervient à un double niveau : celui de l'oeuvre—c'est l'ensemble des caractères qui la rendent lisible, et dont la reconnaissance doit être faite par le lecteur—, celui du public—l'ensemble des critères plus ou moins normatifs, intériorisés par les lecteurs qu'ils s'attendent à retrouver dans une oeuvre nouvelle. Il est clair que les deux horizons d'attente sont loin de toujours coïncider. Intervient ici, une troisième notion clef, celle de *fusion des horizons* (*Horizontverschmelzung*) empruntée à Gadamer. (A second essential concept is that of the 'horizon of expectations' (*Erwartungshorizont*) which intervenes on two planes : that of the work—a collection of characteristics that makes it readable and to which the reader has to introduce himself, and, that of the public, a collection of more or less normative criteria internalized by the readers, criteria that they expect to find in a new work. It is clear that the two horizons are far from always coinciding. At this point intervenes a third key notion, that of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), a notion borrowed from Gadamer.) (pp.50-1)

M. Chevrel transforms reception studies into a rudimentary algebraic formula : the recipient X experiencing the work/works Y. The formula is more elaborately dealt with by the author in another essay<sup>8</sup> in the following way :

A) A 'zero' category constituted of the formula 'X and Y' the unknown quantities, designating as the case may be, works, writers, countries

B) Y in X (country), 'knowledge of Y in X', 'presence of Y in X' 'reception of Y by X'

C) A category illustrating the action of Y: fortune, success, reputation, diffusion, impact and, certainly, influence

D) A category evoking the modalities of the reproduction of Y, reflections of Y in the mirror of the country X ; echo, resonance, repercussion, refraction, mutation

E) A category centred on the possible attitudes of X : reaction, opinion, reading, criticism, orientation

A striking point that he makes in the same article is that the basic formula 'X and Y' is not exactly a zero category because it accords priority to X over Y. Since reception is an active principle the recipient should be the point of departure and not the point of culmination.

Sociologically speaking, the 'X and Y' formula is an attempt to integrate the varied and various cultural spaces. Therefore the formula is also an index to the moral meaning of Comparative Literature. Comparatism is directed towards (to borrow a phrase from Senghor) the creation of 'a universal civilization'. The complexity, as also the value of such an enterprise, lies precisely in an ambivalent project : the search for the universal through what is essentially particular. Knowing the other, in cultural terms, is not deracination but is, paradoxically, a fresh and more vigorous return to one's roots. Dissolving the tension between the self and the other (however utopian that may be) is, according to M. Chevrel the essence of present-day humanism. At the root of all fundamentalist, racist discourses exists a pathetic ignorance of the other. Eradication of this malaise belongs to the future of comparatism. This important though somewhat controversial pronouncement might very well be the starting point of another discourse. The suggestion, so far as the manual is concerned, remains open. For, the true comparatist does not dare to be "assured of certain certainties".

*Purna Chowdhury*

#### NOTES

1. Ulrich Weisstein, "Assessing the Assessors : An Anatomy of Comparative Literature Handbooks", in Janos Riesz, Peter Boerner and Bernhard Scholz (eds.) , *Sensus Communis : Contemporary Trends in Comparative Literature* (Tübingen : Gunter Narr Verlag, 1986), pp. 97-113.
2. René Etiemble, *Comparaison n'est pas raison : La crise de la littérature comparée* (Paris : Gallimard, 1963).
3. Haskell M. Block, *Nouvelles tendances en Littérature comparée* (Paris : Nizet, 1970).
4. Yves Chevrel, *La littérature comparée* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), p. 119.
5. Ulrich Weisstein, "The Permanent Crisis of Comparative Literature", *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, II (1984), 167.
6. Quoted in Chevrel, op. cit., p. 116.
7. Jacques Chevrier, "Les littératures africaines dans le champ de la recherche comparatiste", in Pierre Brunel and Yves Chevrel (eds.), *Precis de littérature comparée* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), p. 215.
8. Yves Chevrel, "Les études de reception", in *ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

### সুবীর রায়চৌধুরী

ভারতীয় এবং পাশ্চাত্য সাহিত্য বিনিময়ের ধারাটি প্রধানত একমুখী। ইংল্যান্ড তথা ইউরোপ থেকে আমরা যাতে বিপুল পরিমাণে আমদানি করেছি, তুলনায় রপ্তানির পরিমাণ অতি নগণ্য। তার ওপর সংস্কৃত সাহিত্য বাদ দিলে আধুনিক ভারতীয় সাহিত্য থেকে ইংরেজি অনুবাদের দায়িত্বও আমরাই গ্রহণ করেছি। বিদেশে এখনও আমাদের স্বদেশী সাহিত্যের চাহিদা এবং জোগানের কাজটা আমরাই করে থাকি।

রবীন্দ্রনাথ এইভাবে প্রথমে বিদেশে পরিচিত হয়েছিলেন। তবে তাঁকে অনুবাদে পড়ে মূল ভাষায় রবীন্দ্রসাহিত্য পড়বার জন্য বাঙলা শিখেছেন অনেক ভিন্নভাষী। এখনও পর্যন্ত রবীন্দ্রনাথই সম্ভবত একমাত্র ভারতীয় কবি যাঁর জীবনী লিখেছেন একাধিক ইংরেজ এবং মার্কিন লেখক। এঁরা প্রায় সবাই মূল ভাষায় তাঁর লেখার সঙ্গে পরিচিত।

বাঙলা ভাষায় দ্বিতীয় দৃষ্টান্ত জীবনানন্দ। রবীন্দ্রনাথের মতো আন্তর্জাতিক খ্যাতির প্রশ্নই ওঠে না, মৃত্যুর সময়ও তাঁর কবিত্বাতি সীমাবদ্ধ ছিলো মুষ্টিমেয় কবিতানুরাগীর মধ্যে। আজ অবশ্য রবীন্দ্রনাথের পরেই তিনি আমাদের সর্বাধিক আলোচিত কবি।

মার্কিননিবাসী প্রাণীবিজ্ঞানের ছাত্র ক্রিস্টন বৃথ সীলির সঙ্গে জীবনানন্দের কবিতার পরিচয় নিতান্ত আকস্মিকভাবে। ১৯৬০ খ্রিষ্টাব্দে ক্রিস্টন বরিশালে গিয়েছিলেন পীস কোর-এর বিজ্ঞানশিক্ষক রূপে। এখানে তিনি দু-বছর ছিলেন। বরিশালেই তিনি বাঙলা শেখেন এবং এখনও তিনি ‘বরিশালের বাঙাল’ রূপে শ্লাঘা অনুভব করেন। কিন্তু বরিশাল ও বঙ্গসংস্কৃতির সঙ্গে পরে তাঁর যেই কারণে অচ্ছেদ্য বন্ধন তৈরি হবে, সেই জীবনানন্দের নাম তখনও পর্যন্ত তিনি শোনেননি। ছয়ের দশকের মাঝামাঝি শিকাগোতে তিনি জ্যোতির্ময় দত্তর কাছে এই কবির কথা প্রথম শোনেন। তারপর তিনি দুই দশকেরও বেশি কাল ধরে অসাধারণ নিষ্ঠায় বাংলাদেশ, পশ্চিমবঙ্গ, দিল্লি থেকে উপকরণ সংগ্রহ করে জীবনানন্দের জীবনী লিখেছেন। ৩৪১ পৃষ্ঠার এই গ্রন্থটির নাম *A Poet Apart*\*। ক্রিস্টন শুধু চরিতকার নন, নিষ্ঠাবান অনুবাদকও। তথ্য এবং ভাষা, দুটোর ওপরে সমান দখল বিরল গুণ। তাছাড়া জীবনানন্দচর্চার সূত্রে তিনি দুই বাঙলার সংস্কৃতি ও ইতিহাসকে নিবিড়ভাবে জেনেছেন। বাঙালির সামাজিক গড়নের সঙ্গে তাঁর এতই ঘনিষ্ঠ পরিচয় যে তিনি প্রসঙ্গত পাঠকদের স্মরণ করিয়ে দেন যে জীবনানন্দের উপন্যাসের সব নায়কই বৈদ্য, যেমন মাল্যবান দাশগুপ্ত, সূতীর্থ গুপ্ত, নিশীথ সেন (গুপ্ত)। তেমনি তাঁর মনে হয়েছে কবির প্রবাদপ্রতিম নায়িকা বনলতা নামটি ঈষৎ সেকেলে — ক্রিস্টন এই নামের ধারা খুঁজেছেন কুসুমকুমারী

রায়চৌধুরীর 'স্নেহলতা' (১৮৮৯-৯০), 'প্রেমলতা', তারকনাথ গঙ্গোপাধ্যায়ের 'স্বর্ণলতা' এবং রবীন্দ্রনাথের 'নষ্টনীড়ে'র চারুলতার মধ্যে। অনুরূপভাবে 'ঘাই হরিণী'-র প্রথম শব্দটি যে অসমিয়া ভাষা থেকে গৃহীত তা তিনি অনেক আয়াসে উদ্ধার করেছেন।

ক্রিস্টন জীবনানন্দের জীবনী লিখেছেন তৎকালীন বাঙলা কবিতার প্রেক্ষিতে। 'প্রগতি', 'কম্বোজ'-এর আন্দোলন এবং 'শনিবারের চিঠি'-র প্রতিক্রিয়া, 'কবিতা' ও 'নিরঞ্জন'-র স্বল্প-প্রতিযোগিতা, সাম্যবাদী আন্দোলন প্রতিরোধকল্পে 'পূর্ববাণী' পত্রিকার তরফ থেকে জীবনানন্দকে প্রতিষ্ঠিত করার প্রচেষ্টা, এই সব 'সাময়িক' এবং সমসাময়িক অনেক তথ্যই সংগৃহীত হয়েছে আলোচ্য গ্রন্থে।

বইটির সাত অধ্যায়ের নামগুলির বাঙলা রূপান্তর হলো এইরকম : ১ শিকড় ২ কম্বোজ যুগ ৩ বরিশালে পুনরাগমন ৪ যুদ্ধের দিনগুলি : সূচনা এবং পরিণতি ৫ কথাসাহিত্যে নতুন উৎসাহ ৬ রাজনীতির কবিতা ৭ মরণোত্তর জীবনানন্দ।

জীবনানন্দ একই সঙ্গে আঞ্চলিক এবং আন্তর্জাতিক। রূপসী বাঙলার পরম মুগ্ধ এই কবি কিন্তু অনায়াসে ধানসিঁড়ি থেকে টাইগ্রিস চলাচল করতে পারেন। বুদ্ধদেব বসু একবার কথা প্রসঙ্গে বলেছিলেন যে জীবনানন্দ অনেক সময়ে বিদেশী অনুষ্ণ খুব সহজে বাঙলায় আনতে পারতেন, যেমন, 'উটের গ্রীবার মতো নিঃসঙ্গতা ...।' উট আমাদের দৈনন্দিন জীবনের অভিজ্ঞতার বাইরে, কিন্তু শরীরের অন্যান্য প্রত্যঙ্গের সঙ্গে উটের গ্রীবার দূরত্ব, নিঃসঙ্গতাকে মূর্ত করে তোলে। বাকপ্রতিমা প্রসঙ্গে ক্রিস্টন প্রদত্ত একটি তথ্যের কথা মনে হলো। 'পাখির নীড়ের মতো চোখ তুলে' জীবনানন্দের এই বহুশ্রুত লাইনটি প্রথমে ব্যবহৃত হয়েছিল দিল্লির রামযশ কলেজে থাকার সময়ে বন্ধু সুধীরকুমার দত্তর উদ্দেশ্যে। প্রয়াত বন্ধুর 'স্মৃতি-তর্পণে' জীবনানন্দ লেখেন, '... মুখে তার পাখির নীড়ের মতো আশ্বাস ও আশ্রয়ের ...' (পৃ. ১২২)। ক্রিস্টন অবশ্য নিশ্চিত নন যে বাকপ্রতিমাটি কোথায় প্রথম ব্যবহৃত হয়েছিল কেননা সুধীরকুমার প্রসঙ্গটি তিনি লেখেন ১৯৩৫ খ্রীষ্টাব্দের জুন মাসে, আর 'বনলতা সেন' কবিতাটি মুদ্রিত হয় ঐ বছরের ডিসেম্বর মাসে।

ক্রিস্টনের বইটি আলোচনা করা যেতে পারে তিন দিক থেকে : তথ্য, ভাষা এবং অনুবাদ।

তথ্যের দিক দিয়ে নানা কিংবদন্তির নিরসন করেছেন ক্রিস্টন। যেমন 'ক্যাম্প' কবিতাটি 'পরিচয়' পত্রিকায় প্রকাশিত হবার পরে অশ্লীলতার অভিযোগে সিটি কলেজ থেকে বরখাস্ত হন জীবনানন্দ। অচিন্ত্যকুমার, বুদ্ধদেব দুটি ভিন্ন কবিতা বিষয়ে এরকম অভিযোগ করেছেন। কিন্তু ক্রিস্টন সেযুগের নানা সাময়িকপত্র ঘেঁটে এবং বহু লোকের সাক্ষ্য গ্রহণ করে দেখিয়েছেন যে অশ্লীলতার দায়ে জীবনানন্দের চাকরি যায়নি। ১৯২৮ খ্রীষ্টাব্দে সিটি কলেজে রামমোহন হস্টেলে সরস্বতী পূজা করা উপলক্ষে হিন্দু ছাত্র এবং ব্রাহ্ম কর্তৃপক্ষের লড়াই অনেক দূর পর্যন্ত গড়ায়। তার ফলে ছাত্রভর্তি আশঙ্কাজনকভাবে কমে যায়। ১৯২৮ খ্রীষ্টাব্দের সাধারণ ব্রাহ্মসমাজের বার্ষিক প্রতিবেদনে বলা হয় যে, ছাত্রসংখ্যা শতকরা পঞ্চাশ ভাগ কমে গেছে। আর্থিক কারণে এগারো জনকে ছুটিই করা হয়েছে। এঁদের মধ্যে ছিলেন ইংরেজি বিভাগের কনিষ্ঠ অধ্যাপক জীবনানন্দ দাশ (যদিও তিনি ঐ কলেজে ছয়

বছর পড়াছিলেন)। ক্রিস্টন বৃদ্ধদেব বসু প্রমুখের তথ্য বিষয়ে লিখেছেন যে ‘ক্যাম্পে’ (১৯৩২) কবিতাটি ‘পরিচয়’ পত্রিকায় প্রকাশিত হয় আর উক্ত পত্রিকাটির প্রকাশকাল ১৯৩১ খ্রিষ্টাব্দ। অন্যদিকে জীবনানন্দ কর্মচ্যুত হন ১৯২৮ খ্রিষ্টাব্দে। তবে এই ঘটনাও এখানে উল্লেখযোগ্য যে ‘ক্যাম্পে’-র পর তিন বছর জীবনানন্দের কোনো কবিতা মুদ্রিত হয়নি। ‘কবিতা’ (১৯৩৫) প্রকাশের পর নতুন করে শুরু হয় তাঁর কাব্যজীবন। ‘কবিতা’-র প্রথম বছরে জীবনানন্দের দশটি এবং পরের বছরে তেরোটি কবিতা ছাপা হয়।

আরেকটি কৌতূহলোদ্দীপক খবর পাওয়া যায় এই বইটিতে। দিল্লিতে রামযশ কলেজে ভালো লাগছিল না জীবনানন্দের। কিন্তু তা সত্ত্বেও চাকরি ছাড়বার কথা তিনি তখনও ভাবেননি। বরং দু-একজন সহকর্মী মারফৎ অধ্যক্ষকে অনুরোধ করেছিলেন চাকরিটা স্থায়ী এবং বিয়ের জন্য ছুটি মঞ্জুর করতে। দুটোই নাকচ হয়ে যাওয়ায় কবির চার মাসের দিল্লি জীবন শেষ হয়।

ধূসর পাণ্ডুলিপি’র (১৯৩৬) সনেটগুলির আগে ১৯১৯ খ্রিষ্টাব্দ নাগাদ ইংরেজিতে সনেট লিখেছিলেন জীবনানন্দ। ‘ময়ূখ’ জীবনানন্দ সংখ্যা থেকে সেটা পুনর্মুদ্রিত করেছেন চরিতকার :

I have felt the breath of autumn wind,  
With the fragrance of spring still in my heart ;  
I have touched, shiveringly, the skirt  
of Autumn—her treasures nervously gleaned ;  
She laughed not like summer, nor grinned  
Like the wind-weary phantom-girt ;  
Nights that out of writer dart  
To her own winning sadness she is pinned.

With a flower, or two—vanishing scent,  
A flash of smile on her demure face,  
She walks with a light half-spent  
By life and half in death’s embrace ;  
She looks like a lady that is gracefully best  
To track the lost lover’s fading trace.

কবির এই কৈশোরের রচনা বিষয়ে ক্রিস্টনের অভিমত :

The rhymes may leave something to be desired, but the poem is noteworthy for a number of reasons. Jibananda used that same Petrarchan sonnet structure, or octave and sestet—the form also preferred by Madhusudan—in most of the poems in the 1934 notebook. And

autumn, evocative of impending death here, was to be the season he concentrated upon in subsequent poetry. Death, a prominent feature of this poem, will be a recurring theme in Jibanananda's later work, as will be the personification of nature as beautiful woman (পৃ. ৯০) ।

গ্রন্থটির শেষ অধ্যায়ে 'মরণোত্তর জীবনানন্দ' মূল পরিকল্পনা থেকে একটু বিচ্ছিন্ন মনে হয় । জীবনানন্দ বিষয়ে যিনি যেখানে যা কিছু বলেছেন, সবাইকে সমান গুরুত্ব দিয়েছেন ক্রিস্টন । যেমন আগই বলা হয়েছে যে, সত্যপ্রসন্ন দত্তর মতে সাম্যবাদী ভাবধারা প্রতিরোধ করার জন্য 'পূর্ববাণী' জীবনানন্দকে প্রাধান্য দিতে চেয়েছেন । এর সমর্থনে অবশ্য ঐ পত্রিকা অথবা সঞ্জয় ভট্টাচার্যর কোনো রচনা উদ্ধৃত করা দুরূহ । চরিত্রকার আলোচ্য অধ্যায়ে অসুজ বসু, অ্যালেন গীনসবার্গ, সুভাষ মুখোপাধ্যায়, মণীন্দ্র রায়, দীপ্তি ত্রিপাঠী, মলয় রায়চৌধুরী প্রমুখ বহু ব্যক্তির মতামত উদ্ধৃত করেছেন । বাঙলা জানেন না এমন বহু পাঠকের কাছে মস্তব্যক্তির আপেক্ষিক গ্রহণযোগ্যতা বিষয়ে ধারণা করা সহজ হবে না । তেমনি জীবনানন্দ দাশ বিষয়ে মার্কসবাদী দৃষ্টিকোণের পরিবর্তনের জন্য সোভিয়েট কমিউনিস্ট পার্টির ২০তম কংগ্রেস অথবা স্ট্যালিন-জম্যাকো নস্যাৎ করা কতটা দায়ী, সে-বিষয়ে আমার সন্দেহ আছে । কেননা বাঙলা ভাষায় সাহিত্যতত্ত্ব বিষয়ে মার্কসবাদী বিতর্কের ধারা অনুসরণ করলে দেখা যাবে যে, রামকৃষ্ণের মতো এখানে যতো মত, ততো পথ । আর এই মত বদলের ইতিহাসে লক্ষ করি যে আমাদের সমালোচনা সাহিত্য বড়ো বেশি তাৎক্ষণিক ভালো-মন্দ লাগার দ্বারা প্রভাবিত ।

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ক্রিস্টনের বাইয়ের আসল জোর হলো তিনি অত্যন্ত দক্ষতার সঙ্গে জীবনানন্দের অনন্যতা বাঙলা ও অবাঙলাভাষী পাঠকের কাছে পৌঁছে দিতে পেরেছেন । জীবনানন্দ বিষয়ে চরিত্রকারের সামগ্রিক মূল্যায়ন হলো :

What we notice in his poetry over the years — he shifted from concentrating on his inner life to an attempt to comprehend the outside world — we observe again in the three novels published thus far. When he creates a character like Malyaban, who in terms of personality verges on being Jibanananda himself, the novel succeeds. And when he writes of the concerns he had over leaving his ancestral home and the frustrations he knew as a forty-eight-year-old college English Professor holding a second class M. A. degree, recently come to Calcutta, trying without much luck to find a job, his fiction becomes engaging, believable, powerful. In short, *Sutirtha*, somewhat outside the sphere of Jibanananda's own experience, never achieves coherence or credibility, while *Malyaban* and *Jalpahari*, in many ways fashioned out of the truth



of his own life, succeed wonderfully (পৃ. ২৩৪) ।

ক্রিস্টনের একটি মন্তব্য বিষয়ে আমার কিঞ্চিৎ সংশয় আছে । ‘আট বছর আগের একদিন’ কবিতায় কথিত ‘পঞ্চমীর চাঁদ’ প্রসঙ্গে তিনি লিখেছেন :

A moon in its fifth phase, not quite half full, would set just before midnight. The day of the sixth phase (sasthi) of the moon is the goddess Sasthis' day. Even though not a caste Hindu, Jibananda was by no means ignorant of Hindu lore. Sasthi, the goddess of children, both nurtures the newly born and provides new life. The man may have hanged himself in order to be born provides new life. The man may have hauged himself in order to be born anew. (পৃ. ১৩৭) ।

প্রথমত পঞ্চমীর শেষ রাত্রির অনুষঙ্গে মা ষষ্ঠীর কথা আমার ধারণা কষ্টকল্পিত । দ্বিতীয়ত কবিতাটিতে মৃত ব্যক্তির পুনর্জন্মের ইচ্ছা কতটা ব্যক্ত হয়েছে, সে বিষয়ে আমি নিশ্চিত নই । তৃতীয় জীবনানন্দ ‘Caste Hindu’ নন বলতে ঠিক কী বোঝাতে চেয়েছেন জীবনীকার ? কিন্তু লেখকের অন্য একটি উক্তির সঙ্গে আমি একমত, কবির কাছে ‘Death or rebirth in the non human world seemed preferable to the exhaustion of life’ . (পৃ. ১৬৪) ।

কিন্তু এই মতভেদ সত্ত্বেও কবিতাটির ক্রিস্টন কৃত রূপান্তর আমার ভালো লেগেছে । দু-একটি অগুচ্ছেদ উদ্ধৃত করার লোভ সংবরণ করা শক্ত :

### *A Day Eight Years Ago ,*

It was heard  
They took him to the morgue.  
Last night in the February dark  
When the crescent moon, five days toward full, had set  
He'd had the urge to die.

A wife had lain beside him—a child, too.  
There had been love, hope, in the moonlight.  
Then what ghost did he see ? Why was his sleep disturbed ?  
Or maybe he hadn't slept for days. Now, lying in the morgue,  
he sleeps.

He had sought this sleep perhaps.  
Like a plague rat, maw smeared with frothy blood, neck slack  
In the bosom of some dingy cranny, now he sleeps  
Never again will he wake.

‘বনলতা সেন’-এর কবিকৃত এবং ক্রিস্টনের অনুবাদ স্থানাভাবে পুরোটা উদ্ধৃত করা গেল না । কিন্তু শেষ কয়েক লাইন থেকেও বোঝা যায় যে, কবি অনেক বেশি স্বাধীনতা নিয়েছেন রূপান্তরে :

মূল

সমস্ত দিনের শেষে শিশিরের শব্দের মতন  
সন্ধ্যা আসে ; ডানার রৌদ্রের গন্ধ মুছে ফেলে চিল ;  
পৃথিবীর সব রঙ নিভে গেলে পাণ্ডুলিপি করে আয়োজন  
তখন গল্পের তরে জোনাকির রঙে ঝিলমিল ;  
সব পাখি ঘরে আসে — সব নদী — ফুরায় এ-জীবনের সব লেনদেন  
থাকে শুধু অন্ধকার, মুখোমুখি বসিবার বনলতা সেন ।

কবিকৃত তরজমা

When day is done, no fall somewhere but of dews  
Dips into the dusk ; the smell of the sun is gone  
off the Kestrels wings. Light is your wit now,  
Fanning fireflies that pitch the wide things around.  
For Banalata Sen of Natore.

‘পৃথিবীর সব রঙ নিভে গেলে পাণ্ডুলিপি করে আয়োজন’-এর রূপান্তর কি ‘Light is your wit now’ ? ঐ লাইনগুলি ক্রিস্টন অনুবাদ করেছেন এইভাবে :

At day’s end, like hush of dew  
Comes evening. A hawk wipes the scent of sunlight from its wings  
When earth’s colors fade and some pale design is sketched,  
Then glimmering fireflies paint in the story.  
All birds come home, all rivers, all of this life’s tasks finished,  
Only darkness remains, as I sit there face to face with Banalata Sen.

বইটির ছাপা নির্ভুল, তবে ৩৪ পৃষ্ঠায় Ketakadasa হয়েছেন Ksetakadasa, আর ২৪১ পৃষ্ঠায় ‘timirhanancer gan’ ছাপা হয়েছে ‘timitahanancer gan’ । প্রচ্ছদটি সুদৃশ্য হলেও মাঝখানে নাগরী হরফের নমুনা বেনানান এবং অর্থহীন । বইটির দাম সাধারণ ক্রেতা এবং গ্রন্থাগারের সাধারণ বাইরে । আশা করি এর সুলভ সংস্করণ শিগগিরই প্রকাশিত হবে । ক্রিস্টনকে অভিনন্দন । আমরা অধীর আগ্রহে অপেক্ষা করছি তাঁর মধুসূদনের জীবনী এবং ‘মেঘনাদবধ কাব্য’-র অনুবাদের জন্য ।